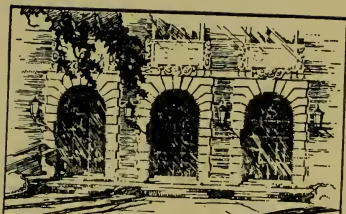




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AFTER LONG WAITING.

VOL II.

AFTER LONG WAITING

BY

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AUTHOR OF 'TWIXT WILL AND WILL NOT.'

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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AFTER LONG WAITING.

CHAPTER I.

A ROSE FOR JOSSLYN.

It was after midnight, and Daisy's birthday-party was now a very merry one. Supper was over, a set of quadrilles had just been danced, and now Geoffrey was singing with such rare sweetness that there were few, even amongst the most enthusiastic lovers of the dance, who were not glad to have an opportunity of hearing him.

Every face wore a pleased and happy look. Every face, that is, except Colonel Shakerley's. His was gloomy enough to have graced an execution, and the straight, upright line that,

for the last ten years or more, had divided his eyebrows was very strongly defined. He had just been engaged in conversation with the wife of a county member, a handsome lady who had the reputation of being the greatest scandal-monger in the neighbourhood.

‘So Miss Daisy is going to be married, colonel?’ she had said.

‘Tis news to me,’ he replied, with a smile.

‘Then it isn’t true?’

‘I didn’t say that. You are much more likely to know than I am. Perhaps you can tell me who is the happy man?’

‘Oh, Count de Rohan, of course. Everyone says it is a delightful match.’

‘Then, if everyone says so, it must be true;’ and, others joining them at that moment, he moved away and wandered moodily down the room.

This then was the meaning of that little ring he had seen on Daisy’s hand at supper. He was hurt and disappointed to think the girl should have engaged herself without his knowledge and approbation, and without her aunt’s—for if

Lady Margaret had known she would certainly have told him.

‘And to that man,’ he muttered, angrily. ‘There is truly no accounting for the taste of women. But perhaps it may be a false report.’

As this thought crossed his mind, he found himself face to face with his son.

‘Bernard,’ he exclaimed, stopping the boy, who would have passed him, ‘doesn’t your friend, De Rohan, occasionally wear a ring set with pearls?’

‘Yes.’

‘I thought so. I want nothing more.’ Then, as Bernard left him, he murmured to himself, ‘There is one satisfaction about that boy—if you ask him a question he does not immediately want to know why you ask it, like a good many folks supposed to be in the full possession of their wits.’

He looked round the room in search of De Rohan, and presently saw the young delinquent sitting on a couch by Miss Betty.

Daisy was also watching him from a distant

corner, and telling herself it was really disgraceful the way he was flirting with the little old lady. But she consoled herself with a determination to pay him off for it before long.

She was to dance the next waltz with him, and Geoffrey had finished his song; but Miss Higley, the daughter of the county member, who had been accompanying him, was still at the piano. Geoffrey had asked her to play something, and after an elaborate re-seating of herself on the music-stool, and a reckless crumpling up of the leaves of her music, she commenced an attack on Stephen Heller's Tarantelle in A flat.

She had got down the first page when two gentlemen who had been strolling about the room together paused just in front of Daisy.

'The rude old things,' she thought, as she recognised Mr. Whitehead and Major de Lacy, an old campaigning friend of her uncle's, who had been dragged to the party by a pretty, wilful daughter.

'Count de Rohan reminds me of young Shakerley,' the major was saying.

'Indeed. I hardly remember Lieutenant

Shakerley.' Mr. Whitehead evidently wished to convey the impression that he had been a mere child at the time of the gallant soldier's death.

'Poor fellow, he was cut down early,' said the major; then added, with a twinkle in his eye—he had only one—'but he made sad havoc amongst the ladies.'

At this point the good man's reminiscence was rudely checked by the recollection that Miss Betty's name had been frequently coupled with the young man's in those by-gone days.

'Ah, De Rohan is on his best behaviour here,' replied Mr. Whitehead, not perceiving his companion's discomfiture. 'You should have seen him in Paris. All the ladies in Madame de Rohan's set adored him, and he managed to keep on pretty good terms with them all, though he got into trouble with the husbands and fathers sometimes.'

'I shouldn't have thought that of him,' said the major. 'He looks too young.'

'He is old enough to have learnt the ways of this wicked world very thoroughly,' answered

Mr. Whitehead, with unpleasant jocularly. 'But the last affair was too serious to laugh at,' he added, gravely. 'Poor Lobstein was a friend of mine.'

'What, that duel!' exclaimed the major, in a low, amazed voice. 'I thought that had been his father.'

'No, the late count was away from home at the time, or I think, bad as he was, he would have prevented it.'

'Well, I am surprised. What was the affair over?'

'I forget the circumstances. I make a point of never getting mixed up in affairs of the sort. Of course there was a lady in the case. Lobstein had a pretty, little wife, a good deal younger than himself, who may have had something to do with it; but I really forget.'

The Tarantelle was ended, and the two men moved away without once looking round at the pale, frightened girl who had listened intently to their conversation. One of them, however, had not been unconscious of her presence.

'Oh, what does it mean?' she asked herself,

as she sat clutching at the arms of her chair—the same chair in which she had sat last night when De Rohan knelt at her feet and begged for her love.

He was coming to her now. She saw him leave Miss Betty with a smile and bow that would have amused her ten minutes ago ; now it only angered her as it recalled Mr. Whitehead's words, and seemed like a confirmation of them.

As he crossed the room, the colonel stopped him.

‘I wish to have a word with you,’ he said, sternly. ‘You will find me in the library.’

‘I will come to you directly, sir. I am engaged for this dance.’ Then he looked up with a smile, and added, ‘You won’t be very hard on me. I couldn’t help it, you know.’

The colonel deigned no reply, but went away to his library, and the young man approached Daisy,

‘Now I shall begin to live again,’ he said, gaily, and bent to take her hand.

But she shrank back from him shuddering.

‘Perhaps he killed that man,’ she was saying to herself.

‘What is it, Daisy?’ he asked, looking much concerned. ‘Are you ill?’

‘Is it true, what they are saying?’ she faltered, looking up at him with almost feverish anxiety.

‘They are saying a good deal, one or other of them,’ he replied, with a smile. ‘I should not like to vouch for the veracity of it all.’

‘Don’t laugh about it,’ she pleaded. ‘That duel with Count Lobstein,—is that true?’

‘Yes.’ Just this one short, cruel monosyllable, and for the life of him he could not say another word. The whole scene was fresh in his mind. Lobstein’s coarse jest, which impugned the honour of Madame de Rohan, rang in his ears as though it had just been uttered, and his own passionate retort. He felt he had not been so very much to blame, and yet he was unable to offer one excuse. He stood speechless before his frail accuser, his face as white as her own, and saw her shrink away from him, disgusted and amazed.

Poor Daisy ! it was very terrible for her. She had been brought up to hate sin, and knew nothing of the temptations that had surrounded the young man. His offence appeared unpardonable to her. She was stunned as well as shocked, and was only conscious of a desire to get away from him. She pushed back her chair till it was stayed against the wall, and in an almost inaudible whisper begged him to leave her.

‘Daisy, don’t,’ he intreated, finding his voice at last, and drawing nearer to her. ‘You do not understand. You must let me see you alone for a minute. If you knew all——’

‘I know enough,’ she interrupted, bitterly. ‘You had no right to speak to me as you did last night. Every word you said was an insult.’

In her innocence and ignorance she was cruel, and the young man felt it; and yet at this moment, when he knew that he had lost her, she was dearer to him than she had ever been.

‘Daisy, you do not know what you are saying,’ he exclaimed, making one last, useless

effort to reason with her. 'I am not so bad as you think. This duel was forced upon me. I could not help it.'

'Other gentlemen help it,' she retorted, scornfully. 'Do you think Geoff or Mr. Traget——' Her cheek glowed as Josslyn's name involuntarily passed her lips, and she left the sentence unfinished; but continued to speak rapidly, so as to prevent him from replying. 'I wish you would leave me, people are beginning to look this way; and I never want to see you again, nor speak to you again—never.' Then catching sight of the ring he had given her she drew it hastily from her finger and without a word almost threw it at him.

'Daisy, you are cruel,' he said, making no effort to take the ring, which fell and rolled past him on the floor.

At that instant Mr. Whitehead came towards them, anxious to know how his little stratagem was succeeding. He picked it up, saying,

'Is this pretty thing yours, Miss Georgina?'

'No,' she answered, shortly; and then turned an almost beseeching glance on De Rohan, fear-

ing lest he might refuse to own it, or say something before this odious man.

She had no cause to be afraid. De Rohan was holding out his hand for it, and there was a smile upon his lips, which was, to all appearance, perfectly natural.

‘Is it yours?’ asked Mr. Whitehead, keeping the ring in his possession, and speaking as if he meant to dispute the young man’s right to it.

‘It is one Count de Rohan gave to me ; I prize it very much. Thanks.’

He slipped it on his little finger, and Mr. Whitehead, who observed that it was too large and might easily have dropped off, did not know what to think. He turned to Daisy, saying in the half-playful tone which he usually adopted when conversing with ladies,

‘Now, Miss Georgina, may I have the pleasure?’ and he offered her his arm.

‘Miss Shakerley has already refused me,’ said De Rohan, for the girl was almost too agitated to speak. ‘She wishes to rest.’

‘Is that so?’ asked Mr. Whitehead, addressing Daisy.

‘Yes; I am very tired.’ The words were almost inaudible.

Strange though it may seem, Mr. Whitehead did not greatly regret her answer. He had heard the colonel express a desire to see De Rohan, and he had work to do before the interview.

It was impossible to say more, now that people were beginning to crowd around them; so with one lingering, loving glance, which Daisy would not see, De Rohan turned away. He was going to keep his appointment with the colonel when he encountered Lady Margaret.

‘Are you not dancing, count?’ she asked. ‘I will find a partner for you;’ and, without waiting for him to speak, she introduced him to Major de Lacy’s pretty daughter.

The poor boy was weary and sick at heart, and, much as he dreaded the coming interview with the colonel, he would have preferred it to waltzing. He judged it best, however, to act as if nothing had gone wrong; and, therefore, with the best grace imaginable, offered his arm to the lively girl, and was soothed and charmed

by her merry prattle in spite of his trouble.

In the meanwhile, Mr. Whitehead approached his sister, who was sitting alone.

‘All this isn’t much in your line, Rachel,’ he said, affably; and then, receiving no reply, continued, ‘Count de Rohan seems to enjoy himself, though. He is the best waltzer I know.’

‘I wish you wouldn’t talk to me about him,’ said Miss Whitehead, snappishly. ‘I cannot imagine what you all see in him.’

Her brother laughed.

‘See in him,’ he repeated. ‘A great deal of self-conceit, and not a little impertinence. But it is about him I want to speak,’ he added, seriously. ‘He is carrying things a little bit too far to-night, and will end by making Miss Daisy very unhappy if some one does not put a stop to his proceedings.’

‘Then why don’t you do something?’ his sister asked. ‘You said the other day that if Colonel Shakerley and Lady Margaret knew as much about him as you do he would be forbidden the house. If the girl is made miserable the fault will be yours, Antony.’

‘That is what I have been thinking,’ replied Mr. Whitehead, complacently, ‘and why I have come to you. I want you to speak to Shakerley. He and I don’t get on well together.’

‘Tell me what to say,’ Miss Whitehead demanded, eagerly.

The prospect of an interview with the colonel offered considerable attraction, and she listened attentively whilst her brother repeated his story of the duel.

‘You will find Shakerley in the library,’ he said, at the conclusion of his narrative. ‘I heard him say he would wait for De Rohan there. It would be as well if you were to see him before he sees the young man.’

‘Certainly,’ said the lady, decisively. ‘Give me your arm, Antony, and I will go at once.’

The music ceased as she spoke, and De Rohan passed them with Miss de Lacy. They were both laughing and making merry over some slight accident which had resulted in one of the roses from the lady’s hair being transferred to the gentleman’s coat. He placed her by Lady

Margaret, who was reading a note which had just been handed to her.

‘Not bad news, I hope, Lady Margaret?’ De Rohan asked, seeing she looked grave as she replaced the missive in the envelope.

‘I hope not. It is from Mr. Traget. His sister is very tired, and they have been obliged to go home.’

‘I noticed they were not at supper,’ he said, turning away.

He went in search of Daisy, for though he might not speak to her the longing to see her was irresistible.

She had fled from the room almost as soon as the music began. Oppressed by the fear that some one might come and talk to her, she determined to go to her own room for a few minutes to try and compose herself. As she crossed the hall with this object in view, she heard some one descending the stairs, and seeing the door open, slipped out on the terrace to avoid the encounter which must otherwise take place.

A good deal of rain had fallen in the earlier

part of the evening, and, though it had now ceased, the sky was wild and stormy. But it was deliciously cool after the heat of the drawing-room, and the moist, damp air refreshed the weary girl, and, at this distance, the music soothed and consoled her.

Whilst she stood listening to it, the light breeze fanning her cheek and brow, she was startled by hearing a movement close beside her, and turning, saw a dark, uncouth object crouched down amongst the shrubs. Her first feeling was one of alarm, but before she had time to retrace her steps she recognised Josslyn's negro servant, Cupid.⁴

The lad had been attracted by the light and music, and was watching the dancing with evident enjoyment. He would have gone away as the young lady approached, but she stopped him, saying, good-naturedly,

‘Don't go if you like it, Cupid.’

The curtains had been drawn away from the window to let in a little of the cool, fresh air, so they could see into the room, and Daisy had no difficulty in singling out De Rohan from the

rest of the waltzers. He seemed the gayest of all that bright assembly; his step was the lightest, and his movements the most graceful. She also recognized Major de Lacy's pretty daughter, and remembered that he had inquired who she was and had admired her beauty before supper.

As they came near the window, some of the flowers fell from the lady's hair. Her companion picked them up and would have returned them, but she waived them aside and a little animated conversation followed which Daisy could not hear. They laughed a good deal, however, and before joining the dance again the young man had pinned the roses in his coat.

'And where are the flowers I gave him?' Daisy asked herself, whilst an indignant flush mounted to her brow. 'He seemed just as glad to get the roses, and, of course, they are ever so much handsomer.'

A long time afterwards she saw them again, her first and only gift to the boy who loved her—a little bunch of faded daisies tied with

the bit of white silk she had wound round them—and then she knew they had been laid away, with a single sprig of stolen myrtle, amongst the poor fellow's treasures. Now she believed them to be cast away, and trodden under foot, and no wonder she was angry.

‘He has soon consoled himself, at any rate,’ she thought, struggling to keep back the tears which were blinding her eyes. ‘He could never have cared much about me, and yet it was for him I refused Josslyn.’

This thought brought with it a strange yearning. Josslyn would never change. The love he had offered her was a reality, and she had lost it whilst trying to catch at the shadow De Rohan had thrown across her path. Now the shadow had vanished, and the reality was beyond her reach. She had spoilt her own life, perhaps Josslyn's; and yet, had she only chosen differently, how happy they might have been.

‘But was it too late?’

This thought occurred to her as the night wind blew something soft and wet against her

cheek, and looking up she saw a pale, melancholy rose, and remembered the compact they had made. 'Send me a rose,' he had said, 'and I shall know.'

'It was a poor, faded thing, dashed by the heavy rain, and spoilt by the frost and cold. It had been considered too worthless and dead to decorate the ball-room, and so it was left to be her messenger. And surely it was a more fitting emblem of her wounded love than if it had been fresh and fair and sweetly scented. This was her only thought as she seized the flower and held it out to Cupid.

'Here, take this to your master,' she said, 'and tell him it is from me.'

The words had hardly left her lips, or the rose gone from her fingers, before she thought better of the act and longed to recall it; but it was too late. With the swiftness of an arrow shot from a bow, the boy had darted over the wet grass. She could just see him running down the avenue, with the precious flower held carefully to his breast to shield it from the storm. It was impossible to run after him, she

would be seen from the windows if she left the shelter of the laurels. She dared not call to him, the music had ceased and the company in the drawing-room would hear her. Then the rain was beginning to fall again, and if she stayed out any longer she would be wet through, and all sorts of terrible questions as to where she had been and what she had been doing would be the consequence of that.

No, nothing could be done. She must return to the house, and let things take their course.

But what—oh, what would Josslyn think of her?

CHAPTER II.

GOOD-BYE TO HOPE.

AFTER seeing his sister enter Colonel Shakerley's library, Mr. Whitehead walked about the hall to wait for her return. He was anxious to learn how his little scheme was working, but could wait without impatience, being pretty sure of what he called success. He chuckled softly to himself, and rubbed his smooth, white hands together, as, with a cat-like tread, he went about examining the curiosities on the walls.

He had not long to wait; presently the door opened, and Miss Whitehead came out. There was a wrathful look upon her face; but unmindful of that he hurried towards her, asking eagerly,

‘How have you succeeded, my dear?’

‘You can manage your own affairs another time, Antony,’ she answered, testily. ‘I declare I would sooner be caged with a Bengal tiger than be closeted for half-an-hour with that man.’

‘It would be shorter certainly,’ her brother replied, laughing. ‘But what did he say to make you angry?’

‘Ask him,’ retorted Miss Rachel, and marched majestically past him into the drawing-room.

Mr. Whitehead laughed again. Something had evidently pleased him to-night.

‘A most amiable creature that, my dear,’ he said, catching sight of Daisy who had just entered, and would have passed him if she could.

She did not reply, but he came forward and offered her his arm.

‘How cruel it is of you to steal silently away by yourself,’ he continued, playfully patting the little hand she had reluctantly laid on his sleeve. ‘Do you know when you are away the music sounds like the clatter of brazen bells ringing a melancholy dirge or funeral knell; the light is darkness, and—er——’

‘Take me to Miss Betty,’ interrupted Daisy, seeing that lady seated alone on a sofa. ‘I have hardly spoken to her all the evening.’

Mr. Whitehead complied, and they joined his sister.

‘Why, my dear child,’ she exclaimed, ‘how pale you are, and your hands are quite cold.’

‘I am very tired,’ said the girl, repeating her old excuse. ‘Let me sit by you for a little while and rest.’

‘Yes; go away, Antony, and leave her to me,’ said Miss Betty, energetically. Then she took one of Daisy’s cold hands between her own warm little fingers, and rubbed it gently; but she did not speak or ask a single question. Her quick instinct had discerned what her brother would have given his ears to hear, and she had respect for the girl’s grief, and was still.

Daisy looked anxiously round the room in search of De Rohan, but could not see him. After lingering about in the hope of catching a glimpse of her for some time, he had left the room intending to go to the colonel.

He was, however, prevented from immediately carrying out his purpose by learning that Miss Whitehead was in the library, and, perhaps, he was not loth to put off the interview.

He seated himself on the stairs,—they had been a favourite resort all the evening, but were deserted now,—and tried to realise all that had happened during this eventful night.

He had lost all hope of winning Daisy's love. That was his overwhelming thought. At first he tried to persuade himself that the cause of the duel might be explained, that Daisy might relent, and that everything might be as it had been between them. But no. He remembered the horror and repugnance with which she had shrunk away from him, and shuddered at the recollection of it.

He was still sitting on the stairs, when the library door opened and Miss Whitehead came out. Her brother met her in the hall and a short conversation ensued between them, and then—yes, then it must be Daisy who joined them. He could not see her from where he sat, or hear her speak; but his heart told him she

was near. And she too was unhappy. She, who before all others should have enjoyed this night, was made miserable—and by him. Perhaps this thought was the hardest of all to bear. He could not suffer alone, however much he might desire it.

The colonel was even more angry than De Rohan had expected to find him. During the war of words which had just been waging between himself and Miss Whitehead he had felt obliged to keep some sort of command over his temper, although she had exasperated him almost beyond the limits of endurance. Now he was certainly not in a mood to be trifled with.

‘It has been an unusually long waltz,’ he observed, sarcastically, as the young man closed the door and advanced into the room.

‘I am sorry if I have kept you waiting. I thought you were engaged.’

‘Miss Whitehead was here. If you had come sooner you might, perhaps, have been able to refute some of the charges she brought against you.’

‘What charges?’

‘Several; but she seemed to take special delight in telling me about a duel between yourself and a Count Lobstein; she evidently expected it would be news to me.’

‘And it wasn’t?’ asked De Rohan, with a sort of relief in his tone.

‘And it wasn’t,’ the colonel replied, drily. ‘But that has nothing to do with the affair in hand. What have you got to say for yourself now you have come?’

‘Nothing.’

He was standing on the hearthrug now, and as he spoke he altered the position of a china vase so that he might rest his arm on the chimney-piece without fear of breaking it. There was not the slightest trace of embarrassment or nervousness in his manner, though the tumult of strong feeling he had to keep in check might well have overpowered a stronger nature than his.

For the rest, his answer comprised the whole truth. He had nothing to say. But one short hour ago he could have pleaded his great love for Daisy, could have told how she loved

him, and then he would have been eloquent enough. Now all that was past. She loved him no longer, and he had nothing to say.

‘Nothing,’ repeated the colonel, with angry impatience. ‘Do you suppose I am going to be put off in that way? You know well enough what I mean. As Bernard’s friend you have been welcome to come here as often as you pleased. I have trusted you to behave honourably and like a gentleman, just as I would have trusted Geoff, or my own son had he been living. And now I demand an explanation of your conduct. You have chosen a time when I was away from home, and during Lady Margaret’s absence, to declare your love to my niece. You have obtained an avowal of her regard for yourself, and on the strength of that you try to draw her into a secret engagement.’

‘I am very sorry,’ said De Rohan, seizing the first opportunity that presented itself of interrupting the storm of words which fell from the colonel’s lips. ‘Did Daisy tell you we were engaged?’

‘Damn your impertinence,’ exclaimed the

colonel, angrily. Then checking himself he added, more calmly, 'No, Miss Shakerley did not tell me. I was left to find it out as best I could, and I tell you I will hear no more of it.'

It occurred to the young man that this was precisely what he had not been told, but he wisely held his peace about that.

'I am very sorry,' he repeated. 'I suppose you will always think what I have done unpardonable, and I have nothing to say in excuse. I have loved Miss Shakerley ever since I first saw her, and it did not occur to me to ask anyone's permission to tell her so. I spoke to her last night, and she said she loved me—there was no engagement.'

'She wore a ring you had given her,' interrupted the colonel, in an exasperated tone, 'and everyone is talking of an engagement.'

'The ring was an accident,' said De Rohan; and smiled as he remembered how Daisy had interpreted his gift. 'I cannot explain.'

'That is a new way of putting it, at all events,' retorted the colonel, grimly. 'But you

must kindly understand that I will have no more such accidents. I shall expect you to leave my house when you leave this room, and not to enter it again. I have nothing more to say.'

He picked up a paper that lay on the table near him, and spreading it out before him made a pretence of reading. He evidently wished the interview to end.

But De Rohan lingered. The happiest hours of his life had been spent here, and this sentence of perpetual banishment was worse than anything he had anticipated. He longed to plead his cause, but could think of nothing to say. Indeed he was almost afraid to speak, for his self-control was well-nigh gone; there was a mist before his eyes, and a choking sensation in his throat which warned him his fortitude was breaking down, and he well knew the colonel, in his present mood, would have but little sympathy with weakness.

Perhaps he had better go. He moved slowly towards the door, and then looked back.

‘I may say good-bye to Lady Margaret before I go?’ he asked, a little brokenly.

‘Certainly; but I must ask you not to see Miss Shakerley again.’

Almost as he finished speaking the colonel was left alone. He threw aside the paper, and it might be seen that his countenance wore a perplexed look. The young man’s silence troubled him. If he loved Daisy he surely would not give her up without a struggle, and yet he had spoken no word of remonstrance or entreaty. There was something wrong—but what?

The colonel walked to and fro in thoughtful silence. Deep down in his heart there lurked a secret fondness for De Rohan, but he crushed it resolutely. It was impossible that his plans for Daisy should be over-thrown by Roger Warwick’s son. But his restlessness did not proceed from any fear of what the young man might do. In spite of his parentage, which was the worst thing he knew of him, he did not doubt he would act honourably. He had not suffered him to become thus intimate with his family

before learning something of his early life. He knew more about the duel than Miss Whitehead could tell him, and had been able to correct her in some important particulars.

There was confusion in store for Mr. Whitehead when his sister should vouchsafe to tell him how her mission had sped.

‘Those two would stop at nothing,’ thought the colonel, his mind reverting to the recent interview with Miss Whitehead, ‘but surely they cannot have told Daisy the story they have just brought to me.’

He stood still, and his face darkened. He saw it all clearly now. Daisy had been told, and, in consequence, had broken off the engagement with De Rohan—if engagement there had been. This much he owed to Mr. Whitehead’s interference. But he was not grateful.

‘The man shall never enter my house again,’ he muttered, angrily. And he held to his resolve.

Miss Whitehead’s share in the conspiracy was dismissed from his mind with contemptuous

indifference. She was merely her brother's mouth-piece.

De Rohan had in the meanwhile returned to the drawing-room where Lady Margaret welcomed him cordially. She was finding it hard work to keep up any degree of merriment, or even cheerfulness. Daisy had deserted her, Geoffrey's face was clouded, and, until now, De Rohan had disappeared. A young lady, fresh from boarding-school, had just been boring the company with a song of many verses, rendered in a thin, weak treble, and the hostess felt with dismay that if something lively did not follow it the evening must end in unmitigated dulness.

‘Count de Rohan,’ she said, ‘I have been looking for you everywhere. Will you sing or play something for us?’

She had learnt that his music, with all its faults of execution, had ever something bright and stirring in it. If he could not make the people talk, no one else could.

De Rohan hesitated, not knowing whether he ought to stay, but it was only for an instant.

He saw Daisy, white and wistful, sitting by Miss Betty, and told himself that he would see her again no more. Scarcely knowing what he did, he went to the piano and struck a few chords. Then, forgetful of the crowded room, he sang,

‘ Falling leaf, and fading tree,
Lines of white in sullen sea,
Shadows rising on you and me ;
The swallows are making them ready to fly,
Wheeling out on a windy sky.
Good-bye, summer! Good-bye, good-bye !
Hush ! A voice from the far away !
“ Listen and learn,” it seems to say,
“ All the to-morrows shall be as to-day.”
The cord is frayed—the cruse is dry,
The link must break, and the lamp must die.
Good-bye to hope ! Good-bye, good-bye !’

The words were full of meaning for him, and he was afraid to begin another verse. His hands fell listlessly from the keys, and he sat, all unconscious of the impression he had made. No one spoke, but everyone was looking at him curiously.

The song had found an echo in Daisy’s heart. She too must bid good-bye to hope, since the boy she loved had sinned so deeply ; but her

resentment against him was over now, and she felt that, in spite of all, she loved him still.

Presently the young man became aware of the silence he had produced, and with a slightly embarrassed laugh he struck the keys again. This time it was a gay, fantastic melody he played, and he played until the people were chatting cheerfully behind him; but he sang no more.

During this last movement, Mr. Whitehead approached Lady Margaret. He was still striving, with a perseverance worthy of a better cause, to effect the overthrow of his rival.

‘I never before heard our young friend sing like that,’ he said, pleasantly, and seated himself at the lady’s side.

‘Nor I,’ answered Lady Margaret, looking at De Rohan. ‘He does not seem at all like himself to-night.’

‘How so?’ questioned Mr. Whitehead, eagerly. ‘In what way has he changed?’

‘I can hardly say, but he has astonished me several times this evening.’

‘Ah, he is an astonishing young man,’ mur-

mured Mr. Whitehead, with his most agreeable smile. He regretted having betrayed interest in anything that concerned De Rohan, and now spoke with rather more than his accustomed indifference. 'I could tell you several surprising stories about him,' he presently added, then paused, hoping to receive encouragement to begin.

Lady Margaret was silent, so he ventured to tell her of the encounter which had taken place between De Rohan and Count Lobstein. Since he first related the story he had remembered, or invented, several minor details which he now delivered with effect, though still taking care to preserve the vagueness and mystery which had shrouded his recitals from the first. In spite of her repugnance for the man Lady Margaret was forced to listen to him, and she was horrified by what she heard.

'I can scarcely credit it,' was her only comment, as Mr. Whitehead, seeing the young man approach them, moved hastily away.

'Good-bye, Lady Margaret,' said De Rohan, offering his hand.

‘Must you go so soon?’ she asked, feeling uncertain how to act towards him; but unable to prevent a certain coldness entering into both her speech and manner, which the young man was quick to notice.

‘I am afraid I must; but you will try to think kindly of me sometimes, won’t you?’

Lady Margaret was surprised at his unusual earnestness. His leave-takings were generally as gay as his greetings, and he would, she supposed, in all probability be with them again on the morrow. She would have questioned him, but he turned away without waiting for her to speak, or again offering his hand—which she had ignored before.

The colonel was standing in the doorway, and as he made way for the young man to pass he held out his hand, prompted chiefly, it is to be feared, by a desire to disappoint Mr. and Miss Whitehead, who were watching to see what he would do. He was surprised at the warmth with which it was grasped, and experienced a slight feeling of compunction when he noticed the young fellow’s altered countenance.

‘Good-bye, lad,’ he said, not unkindly this time. ‘We shall hope to see you again when this ridiculous affair has blown over.’

‘Thank you, sir. Good-bye,’ De Rohan answered, gratefully.

But he did not venture to stay and explain how the ‘ridiculous affair’ never could blow over, neither did he linger in the hall to cherish any vain hope of being re-called. He went out into the night, and walked slowly, yet firmly, down the avenue beneath the dripping trees, and did not once look back at the brilliantly lighted windows, nor pause to hearken to the merry music.

He reached the outer gate. It had been fastened open to allow the carriages to pass in and out; but as he stepped into the road the clasp broke, and the great gate came swinging after him, and latched with a noisy clang. Then it was that his hardly-maintained composure gave way; that all the misery and wretchedness he had been resolutely keeping in the background overtook him, and crushed him utterly, so that he flung himself down on the

sodden bank and cried as if his heart must break.

To his overwrought imagination it seemed as if some relentless fate had closed those iron gates against him, and thus shut him out from Daisy, and from all he might, in winning her, have won—the light and love, the purity and peace that were the adjuncts of her home.

At last he roused himself. The first streaks of dawn were visible in the eastern sky, and he could not stay there when the sun was up. But where to go? That was the question. James would be sitting up for him at the ‘Hillcrest Arms,’ wondering why he did not come. But he shrank, with an absurdly childish dread, from passing those closed gates, and there was no other way. Besides, he feared to meet even James whilst his eyes were red with weeping, and before he had got better used to his disappointment.

He would go to the ‘Eagle and Child.’ The long walk might calm him, it would certainly tire him, and the house was kept, as he believed, by the only relative he had in the world. Mrs.

Welbeck would be glad to see him, and he could stay with her till James arrived. Then they would go back to France together.

He never hesitated about returning thither, though the life he would lead in its gay capital had few attractions for him. A certain set of people there would welcome him back amongst them, and from henceforward they must be his companions.

With wearied feet and aching head he strode along, feeling too desolate and miserable to think of looking back at the grey walls of the dear, old house he loved so well. He had proceeded a mile or more, before he became conscious of a patter of feet behind him, and discovered that Jove was following. He was, of course, quite aware that the right thing for him to do would be to send the dog home—and Jove knew it too, therefore had he kept behind. But a look of pleasure flushed into the young man's face as he whistled the dog to his side, and, bending down to caress the shaggy head, invited him to share his banishment.

CHAPTER III.

AS A BROTHER.

ON the morning which followed the birthday party, Geoffrey rose early. He was anxious about De Rohan, and had passed a wakeful night. What would the young man do now his intercourse with the colonel's family was at an end? Would he go back to Paris, and resume the careless life to which he had said good-bye some three months before? or would he linger at Hillcrest in the hope of again seeing Daisy? Geoffrey was sure he would go away, and thought it the more honourable course; nevertheless, he had lain awake all night wondering how he could prevent it.

If only Roger Warwick had lived long enough to complete his story, and had not exacted that troublesome promise of secrecy! This was the

burden of the young man's musing, but it could avail him nothing.

He had been the recipient of all his uncle's notions respecting Josslyn, and he knew he could not, even had he been free to speak, prevail upon him to acknowledge De Rohan as his son on such slender testimony as he had to offer. He could only wait, and hope to obtain some more convincing proof that should be altogether independent of Roger Warwick's death-bed revelation. And in the meanwhile, though he was full of sympathy for De Rohan, his own prospects were not entirely wrapped in a cloud.

He must go and enquire how Violet was to-day, and to-morrow would be her birthday. He might make it the occasion to offer some trifling gift for her acceptance. There was an old-fashioned bracelet of his mother's that Daisy sometimes wore, and Violet had once admired. He had resolved never to part with it, but if he gave it to Violet it would not be like giving it to anyone else, for some day he would ask her to be his wife. He wavered, but

not for long. By the time the bracelet was found and polished up a bit, his mind was quite made up. He could not, however, take it to Miss Traget at day-break, so he had a solitary breakfast and then went for a walk.

Colonel Shakerley came down soon after his nephew left the house, and he also breakfasted alone—Bernard being the only member of the family who could have joined him, and he preferred to go without rather than have it *tête-à-tête* with his father.

Daisy had a cup of coffee in her own room, but was too miserable to eat anything. She wanted to tell her aunt all that had happened, but Lady Margaret was not yet awake. The girl waited anxiously until she might go to her ; but when she might have gone she hesitated, being ashamed of her story. Whilst she hesitated the colonel carried some tea and the morning papers into his wife's room, and then, with a sigh of disappointment, Daisy stole down to the drawing-room. There she found some needle-work and tried to keep her mind as well as her fingers occupied with it.

Nearly an hour passed, and she was stitching away industriously when the sound of the door-bell startled her. It was Josslyn's ring.

She had not thought about his coming at all, and now, in a moment, he might enter the drawing-room. Perhaps he was prepared to greet her as his promised bride. She hardly knew what she had done, or how he would read her token.

'Send me a rose,' he had said, 'and I shall know.' She had sent the rose, and now——

There was a way of escape. She might pass from the drawing-room into the dining-room without entering the hall, and so get safely to her own little parlour. Once there she determined that nothing should tempt her to quit it again to-day. Josslyn was in the hall now—he was asking for Lady Margaret. She hastily gathered up her work so that it might not betray her flight, and noiselessly opened the folding doors which divided the two rooms. As she did so the opposite door opened, and Josslyn entered.

It would be difficult to say which of the two

was most embarrassed by the unexpected encounter, but the young man was the first to regain presence of mind. At the sight of Daisy's distressed face, with the blush of shame and a trace of recent tears visible upon it, he forgot himself entirely. He had lain awake all night thinking how he should greet her, and what he should say to convince her of his gratitude and love. She had allowed no natural bashfulness to prevent her keeping the promise she had given ; she had sent him the rose he asked for, and he had come prepared to repay her with the devotion of a lifetime.

What has become of De Rohan?' This had been his first thought when Cupid gave him the flower, but before morning he persuaded himself that he had been mistaken.

De Rohan could not have given Daisy the ring she wore last night, or he had given it to her for a birthday-present only—they were not engaged.

He dismissed all thought of the young man from his mind, and came to the Hall never doubting but that Daisy would be willing to

receive him. Yet, with the innate straightforwardness which characterised all his actions, he asked to see Lady Margaret first. Most likely Daisy would have told her everything by this time—if not, he need not tell her—and perhaps the girl would prefer to meet him in her aunt's presence. She was probably feeling half ashamed of what she had done, and he would take no mean advantage of the confidence she had placed in him.

He said he would wait in the dining-room whilst the servant went to ascertain if Lady Margaret could see him. There, he thought, it was unlikely he would be disturbed; but it was this very precaution which led to the meeting.

And now, for one brief moment, he stood speechless before the girl he loved and could read nothing in her pale, frightened face but fear, and shame, and a longing desire to get away. There was not a trace of love, or a semblance of delight. For an instant the room seemed to swim round with him, and he felt sick at heart, and sorely disappointed. But he

soon had command of himself again. Daisy had no need to be afraid of him. He was ready to sacrifice himself entirely if he could only make her happy—either with his love, or without it.

‘Never mind troubling Lady Margaret, John,’ he said, steadying his voice to address the servant. ‘Miss Shakerley will give her my sister’s message.’ Then he shut the door, with something of a bang, and crossed over to the young lady’s side.

‘Good morning, Miss Daisy,’ he said, taking the hand she was too frightened to hold out to him. ‘I thought I might come and ask how Lady Margaret is, she looked tired when we left last night. And Violet wanted me to explain the cause of our abrupt departure. You know she was foolish enough to waltz, and has knocked herself up completely.’

He was now speaking just in his ordinary voice—rather loud, but with a pleasant resonance and fulness of tone that was peculiar to him. He had kept hold of her fluttering, little fingers, and had drawn her back into the draw-

ing-room—for she seemed to have lost the power of independent action.

‘Come and sit down,’ he added, placing a chair for her, ‘and tell me all that happened last night after we left.’

She obeyed him mechanically, and he seated himself on a couch at some little distance from her. For a minute or two there was silence. Josslyn was leaning forward with an arm resting on each knee and his hands clasped in front of him. His head was slightly thrown back so that he might the better see the girl’s face, and he regarded her attentively. It was not exactly a stare, for, so far from embarrassing her, it gave her courage, and she was impressed by his manly bearing. She knew him to be the soul of generosity and kind-heartedness. Surely he would not be hard on her—she was such a little thing, and so easily frightened. But how she had trifled with his love. She felt that keenly enough now, and it was almost with a sob she faltered,

‘Forgive me, Josslyn. I was so very miserable.’

He did not change his attitude, or alter his expression in the least.

‘I know,’ he said ; ‘tell me all about it. Perhaps I shall be able to help you.’

His voice was full of persuasive tenderness, and it brought a rush of ready tears to Daisy’s eyes ; but she kept them back with an effort.

‘I cannot,’ she murmured. ‘Don’t ask me, please. Try and forget there ever was such a time as last night.’

‘Then how shall I be able to help you?’

‘No one can help me. I am quite sure I shall never be happy again.’

‘At eighteen?’ He shook his head and laughed incredulously. ‘Just forget we were ever strangers to one another, and talk to me as you would to a big brother. I daresay I shall be able to help you. I will if I can. Come—there’s a good girl—don’t be afraid.’

He seemed to have accepted the relationship he had just proposed in earnestness, and though his tone was kindly, it was exceedingly matter-of-fact.

It was a great relief to Daisy to hear him

speak so, but it took her off her guard. All her fortitude broke down, and the till now hardly restrained tears flowed freely.

Poor Josslyn. It would be impossible to describe the longing he felt to take her in his arms and try to comfort her. Once he stretched out his hand as if to take hers; but withdrew it again—it would be ungenerous to take advantage of her weakness. He was silent until she was able to speak.

‘I suppose you think it is very wrong to fight a duel?’ she then asked him, abruptly.

The question surprised the young man.

‘I really don’t know,’ was his exceedingly unsatisfactory answer. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘Because last night I overheard Mr. Whitehead tell another gentleman that Count de Rohan had been engaged in an affair of that kind a year or two ago. I thought there could be no doubt about its being very wrong, and I told him never to speak to me again.’

‘That was a trifle hard, wasn’t it?’

‘I didn’t think so at the time. You don’t think any the worse of him, then?’

‘I can hardly say. A good deal might depend on the circumstances. Do you know what they were?’

‘Mr. Whitehead said it had something to do with a Countess Lobstein.’

Josslyn’s face darkened. The *rôle* he had assigned himself was not an easy one, but he was determined not to say anything that would prejudice the girl against her lover.

‘I don’t think I should place much confidence in any statement of Mr. Whitehead’s,’ he said, when he had, in a measure, got the better of his indignation.

‘But Louis said it was true. I asked him, and then I gave him his ring back.’ She stopped, much confused; but Josslyn’s face was as imperturbable as ever.

‘Where is De Rohan now?’ he asked. ‘Have you seen him since last night?’

‘No. Uncle saw him afterwards, and I believe he is never to come here again.’

‘Colonel Shakerley knows of the engagement, then?’

‘I don’t know.’

Josslyn rose. Daisy could tell him nothing more, and he longed to be doing something.

‘I shall see him—De Rohan, I mean—and I will get to know the truth about it. Probably he was not so much to blame as you think.’

The look of gratitude, and the smile that once again irradiated Daisy’s face, showed the young man plainly enough where her love was given.

‘Oh, will you?’ she exclaimed. ‘It is good of you; but,’ she added, in a tone of nervous entreaty, ‘you won’t say anything about me?’

‘Certainly not.’

He was standing close beside her now, and was looking down at her with a strangely perturbed expression. All the calmness and matter-of-factness had vanished from his face; the big brother was gone, and the girl recognised her lover.

‘It isn’t that I don’t want it, Daisy,’ he said. ‘I know you won’t think that; but I thought perhaps you would rather have it back.’

He dropped the rose in her lap as he spoke, and without waiting for a reply was gone.

For a long time Daisy sat lost in thought; Josslyn passed the window, taking long, swinging strides, and seeming to have some definite purpose in his mind. Something good and kind the girl did not doubt, and she acknowledged to herself that it might have been possible to love him—even as he deserved to be loved—if she had never seen De Rohan.

CHAPTER IV.

LOUIS AND JOSSLYN.

It would not be easy to analyse the thoughts which disturbed young Traget's mind as he walked briskly down to the 'Hillcrest Arms,' bent on learning the truth from De Rohan.

To Josslyn, who had never done anything underhand in his life, the young man's conduct seemed altogether blameworthy, and yet, for Daisy's sake, he was eager to find excuse for him. His own love for the girl was thoroughly unselfish, strong, and true. She was in truth his first love. He had never indulged in idle fancies about other girls he had met, nor had any youthful flirtation to weaken this real attachment. Even now, when she had avowed

her preference for another, he was willing to serve her to the utmost of his power.

James was walking about the causeway in front of the 'Hillcrest Arms,' and, in answer to Josslyn's question, said he had not seen De Rohan that morning and did not know where he was. He thought he had been staying at the Hall until a few minutes ago when Mr. Bernard came to enquire for him.

On hearing this, Josslyn was inclined to be uneasy, but James had every confidence in the young man taking care of himself.

'He is sure to send for me before the day is over, if he does not return here himself,' he said.

'Well, as soon as he does let me know where he is. I wish to see him very particularly, and shall be at home till I hear from you.'

Having made this arrangement Josslyn went home and ordered some lunch, so that he might be ready to start without delay to any place whither James should direct him.

Violet had had her own way in the house, and it was rather a stupendous undertaking to

get an early luncheon at the Traget's now ; but the young man was too pre-occupied to consider whether or not his order would create consternation in the kitchen. He rang the bell sharply, and when the new footman, resplendent in his new livery, answered it, he gave his order with assurance.

‘I'll have a glass of beer and some bread and cheese, George.’

‘Yes, sir,’ the man, replied, imperturbably.

He was too well trained to show surprise at the young man's simple taste.

‘And Cupid can bring it in, George.’

‘Yes, sir,’ again murmured George ; and, in a rather longer time than it would have taken in the old days when Martha reigned supreme in the kitchen, the boy appeared with a tray.

Josslyn threw aside the paper he had been reading, and watched the lad place the things on the table in a slow, stupid fashion. Cupid had not changed.

‘Are those fresh people good to you, Cu ?’ he asked, laying his hand in a friendly manner on the boy's shoulder before sitting down.

Cupid nodded, and passed some signs that would have puzzled anyone but his master. Josslyn understood him, and was satisfied. He dismissed the boy, and was cutting himself some bread and cheese when Mr. Traget came in from the garden.

‘Eh, lad,’ he exclaimed, ‘but how did you get that?’

‘I asked that fine gentleman in the kitchen for it,’ his son replied, laughing.

‘I wonder whether he could be induced to do it again?’

‘We might try;’ and, without moving from his seat, the young man shouted ‘Cupid,’ in the vulgar, but effectual way which had been in vogue before they became grand.

It answered now as well as ever, and in a few minutes Mr. Traget was enjoying the simple fare.

They sat for a long time over it. The old man appreciated a chat with his son, and Josslyn had to put lovers’ quarrels out of his head and listen to his father’s latest scheme for employing his spare time and capital. He proposed to

purchase a small farm which had just been notified for sale, and to superintend the farming of it himself.

‘Of course,’ he added, after fully explaining his plans to his son, ‘Shakerley will want it, but I shall out-bid him.’

‘I hardly think he would dispute the matter with you, if he knew you were eager for the purchase.’

‘I don’t know. He was very determined to have that place of Roger Warwick’s.’

‘That always seemed like a bit cut out of his land; but, as a matter of fact, I don’t think he is very desirous to add to his estate now. There is only Bernard to come after him, you see.’

‘It must have been an awful blow to him—the loss of that other lad,’ said Mr. Traget, musingly. ‘He was a jolly little chap as I remember him.’

He was silent for a few minutes, and, to judge from the expression of his face, his thoughts were not altogether pleasant. They did not hold him long, however. With a merry twinkle

in his eye he produced a couple of rosy-cheeked apples from his pocket, turned them round in his hand several times, and gave one to his son, looking at him the while as if he thought him a small boy who would consider it a treat. He set his own teeth in the other, and then smacked his lips together in a manner hardly compatible with good breeding,

‘Not bad, eh, Joss?’

‘Delicious, sir. Your own growing?’ asked the young man, always ready to humour him. Mr. Traget was as proud of his orchard as Josslyn was of the roses.

Whilst they were engaged with the apples, Cupid entered with a note which he handed to Josslyn. The young man hastily tore it open. It was from James, and was very brief.

‘DEAR SIR,

‘Count de Rohan is staying at the “Eagle and Child,” where I join him immediately.

‘Yours respectfully,

‘JAMES PARKER.

‘Josslyn Traget, Esq.’

Josslyn put the letter in his pocket, and turned to his father who was watching him a bit suspiciously.

‘It is from De Rohan’s man,’ he said ; adding, ‘Let us have a bit more talk about the farm before you do anything. I think the purchase can be managed better than for you to out-bid Colonel Shakerley. That would mean giving twice the value of the place.’

‘We’ll see about it,’ replied Mr. Traget ; and, not blind to the fact that his son wanted to be off somewhere, rose, adding, ‘I am going to see Stevens now about mending that fence. His pony was trespassing in my orchard again last night, and I won’t have it.’

They went out together, but parted at the garden gate.

When Josslyn reached the ‘Eagle and Child,’ James, who had driven there, had just arrived and was with his master. Mrs. Welbeck was, to use her own phraseology, ‘just swabbing up the kitchen floor.’ This process necessitated having a pail of water at the door and running to and from it with a streaming mop which

she flourished about with reckless ardour.

During the operation she talked incessantly, and Josslyn learnt from her that De Rohan had reached the inn about ten o'clock, and that she thought him looking very ill.

Whilst they were talking James came downstairs, and told Josslyn that the count was waiting to see him.

‘You won’t keep him longer than is necessary, sir?’ the man added, solicitously. ‘I am afraid he has really over-fatigued himself this time, and he won’t let me do anything for him till he has seen you.’

Josslyn promised, and went up to De Rohan’s room. It was the same apartment he had occupied when travelling to Hillcrest for the first time, and it looked now much as it had done then. The floor was scrupulously clean, the big bed with its gaudy hangings was wheeled away into one corner, and the sofa was drawn up before the fire. A small table, bearing a jug and empty tumbler, stood beside it, and there was a faint odour of brandy and cigar smoke in the room.

De Rohan was seated near the fire doing nothing—unless stroking Jove's head in a somewhat listless fashion could be called occupation. He was in evening dress, and his linen looked soiled and crumpled. When Josslyn entered he rose to meet him, and forced a smile, very unlike his usual merry one, as they shook hands over the sofa.

‘This is very good of you, Traget; but I hope you have not come to annihilate me for persuading your sister to waltz last night.’

For an instant Josslyn did not answer. He had been prepared to find the young man looking ill, but it was all he could do to prevent his astonishment from openly betraying itself. A day and a night had not passed since he last saw him, and singled him out from a crowd of happy people wondering at the way in which he could enjoy himself and make others merry. Then he looked in perfect health, and had been in indisputable good spirits, whilst the conscious feeling of triumphant love heightened the natural brilliancy of his complexion and added to the beauty of his dark eyes. Now he was

paler than Josslyn had ever seen him, and his expression of reckless misery was increased rather than diminished by the strenuous effort he made to assume his old, light-hearted manner.

Certainly the change was a remarkable one to have taken place in so short a time. Josslyn had probably suffered more than he had done since Daisy rejected his suit, but only a very close observer could have remarked any alteration in his appearance.

As he did not speak, De Rohan resumed, more seriously,

‘I hope it did not do her any harm. I thought she would enjoy it, and watching other people enjoy themselves must be very dull.’

‘Violet is all right, thank you—at least I think she soon will be. She was only tired.’

They were both silent for several minutes. Then Josslyn, to introduce the subject which had led him to seek the interview, said,

‘I was at Hillcrest this morning.’

De Rohan coloured, and looked at him curiously.

‘How are they?’ he asked, with assumed indifference.

‘I only saw Miss Shakerley. Lady Margaret was resting, and the others were out.’

‘Well, how is she?’

He could keep up the indifference no longer, and betrayed real interest, both in his face and voice, as he asked the question.

‘Very unhappy,’ Josslyn answered, shortly; and silence again ensued.

De Rohan caressed the dog, and looked into the fire in evident embarrassment. Josslyn regarded him attentively for several seconds. He had come to the ‘Eagle and Child’ in no very amiable frame of mind; but his anger, always short-lived, was almost forgotten now. However deeply the young man might have sinned there could be no doubt that he had also suffered, and his present melancholy, when contrasted with his natural light-heartedness, was almost pathetic. It moved Josslyn to say, with more kindness than he would otherwise have done,

‘Tell me all about it, lad. I daresay the thing is not so bad after all.’

De Rohan was surprised and touched, but he answered shortly,

‘I don’t know what there is to tell. The best thing you can do is to leave me alone.’

Josslyn was not without a doubt about the advisability of his interference, but it seemed ill-natured to leave the young man alone in his distress, so he drew his chair nearer the couch on which De Rohan had thrown himself and asked,

‘What led to your engagement being broken off last night?’

‘I scarcely know. Daisy heard some report about me which angered her, but she was too agitated to explain properly.’

It irritated Josslyn to hear the girl he loved spoken of familiarly by her pet name, and he said, impatiently,

‘She heard about the duel with Count Lobstein. I should like to know what led to that. You admitted the truth of the report, I believe.’

‘Yes, it’s true enough, and talking can do no good.’

He spoke wearily, and evidently wished to dismiss the subject, but Josslyn was not going

to be put off. The eager, grateful look he had seen on Daisy's face when he avowed his intention of seeking this interview made it impossible for him to go away without learning something that would be a comfort to her. He was not without hope either. There was so much that was straightforward and pleasing about De Rohan that he felt justified in refusing to credit Mr. Whitehead's story until it had been confirmed by the young man himself.

'I wish you would be candid with me,' he said, persuasively. 'I would not trouble you if I did not think I could help you, and——' he hesitated, 'and Miss Shakerley. She has been made very unhappy by what she overheard last night, and I think it is your duty to let her know the whole truth now. She ought to have known it before, or at any rate her uncle ought.'

'He says he did know. Not that I told him though,' De Rohan admitted, candidly. 'I considered the whole affair was over and done with long ago.'

It occurred to Josslyn that mere lapse of time

does not obliterate wrong-doing; but he was not given to moralising, and he argued hopefully from the fact that the colonel had known of the duel. If there had been anything disgraceful in it, he would not have allowed the young man to become intimate with his family.

‘Who was this Count Lobstein?’ he asked, after a pause.

‘A friend of Count De Rohan’s. I really know very little of him beyond that.’

‘He was married, I believe?’ Josslyn was watching his friend’s face attentively, but the young man did not appear to be in the least disconcerted by the question.

‘Yes,’ he answered, readily, ‘but I did not know his wife. She and Madame de Rohan were not intimate.’

‘Do you know that Mr. Whitehead introduced her name into his story?’

The colour flushed into De Rohan’s face, but he spoke quietly.

‘I never saw her.’

‘Was any lady mixed up in the business?’ asked Josslyn, beginning to feel his position

embarrassing, but determined to proceed with his investigation.

‘Yes, Madame de Rohan. Perhaps you think,’ he concluded, bitterly, ‘that the duel was the natural ending to an illicit love-affair. Well, it wasn’t.’

‘I didn’t think it, at least not for long; though that was evidently what Mr. Whitehead wished to imply.’

De Rohan muttered an imprecation, and then there was silence for some seconds. Josslyn was the first to speak.

‘Tell me how it happened,’ he said.

‘About a dozen of us met for cards and supper, and late in the evening Lobstein introduced Madame de Rohan’s name into the conversation, and said things about her which angered me. A quarrel ensued, during which I called him a liar and threw a pack of cards at his head. He demanded an apology which, of course, I refused—it would have been equivalent to admitting there was truth in the slander—so he challenged me, and we met next morning.’

‘Well?’ inquired Josslyn, after a pause. De

Rohan seemed to think he had got to the end of the story, and there was much that he wished to hear.

‘There is really nothing more. The very thought of fighting turned me sick. If I had been as good a shot as he, I should have stood no chance at all.’

‘Then did you get the worst of it?’ asked Josslyn, much interested.

‘Yes; I was badly hurt, and Lobstein left the country. I don’t know what became of him, but I fancy he got into a similar difficulty abroad.’

‘And Count de Rohan, where was he during it all?’

‘No one knew. He was keeping quiet somewhere till a little affair of his own might be forgotten. He was very good to me afterwards.’

Josslyn leaned back in his chair with a thoughtful expression. He did not know what to advise, but, from his point of view, there was nothing in this which he had just heard to unfit De Rohan for becoming Daisy’s husband.

‘I think you ought to explain everything to

Miss Shakerley without loss of time,' he said, after a brief consideration.

'She wouldn't listen to me last night, and I don't suppose she would now—besides which, the colonel has forbidden me the house. I mean to leave England to-morrow, and I shall not try to see her again.'

'What nonsense!' exclaimed Josslyn, half angrily. 'What is the good of making both her and yourself miserable in this way? Go to Colonel Shakerley like a man, and tell him what you have told me.'

'I dare not; you don't know what you are asking.'

He shivered either from cold or fear, and moved to a chair near the fire. The dog followed him, and, crouching down beside him, looked up wistfully into his face. Josslyn was less sympathetic. Such weakness was contemptible in his eyes.

'Of course you will do as you think best,' he said, coldly. 'I think it would be more honourable if you would act as I suggest. You have gone too far to back out in this way. After doing

all you could to win the girl's love, you have no right to let it slip from you as if it were something not worth holding. You have probably made her unhappy for years.' He remembered his promise to Daisy, and stopped abruptly.

'You do not understand,' said De Rohan, with more animation than he had yet shown. 'Do you suppose if I thought Miss Shakerley would be any happier for seeing me that anything could keep me away? I don't go, simply because I am afraid to occasion her distress.'

'No, I don't understand,' admitted Josslyn, frankly, 'but it doesn't much matter. Take my advice, and go to bed—you look dreadfully tired. After an hour's sleep you will think better of your determination to go abroad.'

De Rohan shook his head.

'I couldn't sleep, and I shall not change my mind. I am sorry for what has happened, but I don't think Miss Shakerley will be unhappy about me for long. She never really loved me.'

'Don't judge too hastily,' said Josslyn, with a smile. 'I tell you you will think differently in the morning.'

‘Don’t tempt me, Traget. I might try to win her love, and possibly succeed—then she would be miserable for life.’

Josslyn did not urge him further. It may be that he was much of the same opinion himself, though he would not say so.

There was a silence, during which De Rohan went back to the sofa, and sat with his elbows on his knees and his head between his hands. Josslyn was sorry to see how ill he looked; but, well used to sickness though he was, did not know what to say. Violet was irritable when she was unwell, and, at the moment, he could have found it in his heart to wish De Rohan the same—that phase of the malady being so much easier to deal with—but the poor fellow was evidently too weary and sick at heart to be bad-tempered.

De Rohan was the first to speak. He looked up suddenly, and was struck by Josslyn’s pitying expression.

‘I look a fit subject to be thinking of matrimony, don’t I?’ he said, with a tuneless laugh. ‘Apart from every other consideration,

you must see that I am far too near the grave to ask any girl to be my wife.'

He was almost tragic in his hopelessness, and Josslyn only repressed a smile with difficulty as he answered,

'My dear fellow, it isn't a week since you did it.'

'I know that; but I neither looked nor felt then as I do now. Yet it has been coming on for some time, only I have been too happy lately to think I could be ill.'

'What has been coming on?' asked Josslyn, looking—as indeed he was beginning to feel—much concerned, and completely bewildered.

'I don't know—a general feeling of lassitude, and want of energy. Last night I could not get through even one dance without having to rest several times, I was so short of breath.'

'Have you seen a doctor?' asked Josslyn. 'You may be alarming yourself needlessly.'

'I will see one as soon as I get to Paris. But I know well enough what he will say—I haven't another year to live. Not that it matters much now—perhaps the sooner the end comes the

better.' He leaned his head on the back of the sofa, and yawned wearily.

'Don't be absurd,' said Josslyn, not unkindly, though there was a trifle of impatience in his tone. 'You won't think like that after a night's rest. In the morning you will be willing enough to live out your allotted span of life without complaining of its length.'

De Rohan pulled himself up into a sitting posture again.

'You are right there,' he exclaimed. 'I love this life. Yes, even now, when nearly all that makes it sweet and pleasant has gone from me, I love it to adoration, and the thought of death is odious. It makes me sick to think of the end of life : shroud, and coffin, and green churchyard, and all the rest of it—a marble monument last of all, if anyone takes the trouble to erect one.'

Josslyn had never been more set fast in his life. He did not in the least know what to say ; but he had a certain amount of practical common sense which did not often desert him.

'Have you had anything to eat since you came

here?' he asked, with apparent irrelevancy.

'No.'

'That accounts for everything. I will tell James to bring you some dinner at once.'

'I don't want anything. If you will stay with me I shall like that better than anything else.'

'I would stay with pleasure if I could be of any use, but I am only making you talk and excite yourself.'

'I am not excited, and talking is better than thinking. Sit down again, there's a good fellow.'

Thus exhorted, Josslyn sat down, though with an inward conviction that he would be better away. His compliance seemed to have a tranquillising effect on De Rohan. For several minutes he lay quite still; then he raised himself on one arm, and, with unexpected penetration, asked,

'Do you love Miss Shakerley yourself, Traget?'

'Yes,' Josslyn answered, simply; but with glowing cheeks. It did not occur to him to pretend that he did not.

'I guessed as much,' said De Rohan, with a

smile that had less of sadness in it than might have been expected. 'You will make her happier than I could have done.' Then, after a pause, he added, 'I should like her to visit my grave.'

'My dear fellow,' exclaimed Josslyn, laughing in spite of himself, 'don't drive with such a tremendously long whip. In one short sentence, you have married me and buried yourself. My imagination isn't equal to the strain.'

'Don't chaff me, Traget,' the young man pleaded. 'I am more unhappy than you think. I love life, and the fear of death has fallen upon me.'

In an instant Josslyn was as serious as he could wish, but words of consolation did not come readily to his lips.

'Death is not the end of life,' he said, awkwardly enough.

'I know, but the life after death will be different from this.'

'Yes, better.'

'I doubt it. At least, I don't think I shall like it so well.'

The old look of reckless misery came into his face again. He was silent for an instant, then leaned back on the sofa, with his hands clasped behind his head, and began to quote, softly,

“Ye say that songs of triumph swell, and flowers eternal
wave,
Along the streams of life that flow 'mid scenes beyond
the grave,
But shall I love the fadeless blooms and songs of
endless joy,
Like strains that make it bliss to weep, and flowers
that bloom to die?

Then blame me not, that, called away into a land of bliss,
I fondly linger on the shores of such a world as this;
And better love than aught I know of bright immortal
spheres
This earth, so lovely in her woe, so beautiful in tears.”’

Josslyn listened to these lines in silent astonishment. Had it been possible for him to work himself into a similar state of despondency, he would have been as incapable of quoting a verse of poetry descriptive of his feelings as of taking a journey to the moon. He was not only perplexed, but sincerely sorry for the boy, and after a few moments spent in thought broke the silence.

‘Louis,’ he said, speaking softly, and almost unconsciously using the young man’s Christian name. Then he paused, and his colour deepened.

‘Well?’ asked De Rohan, turning his head so that he could see his face.

But Josslyn had never before attempted to speak of religious matters, and found he could not do it now.

‘I think you are deceiving yourself,’ he blundered.

‘In what way?’ asked De Rohan, smiling, but not maliciously, at his friend’s embarrassment. ‘Don’t you like the verses?’

‘I don’t know, but I think we have it much in our own power to choose what we will love, and what despise. And,’ he added, with more assurance, ‘this life is not the best God has prepared for them that love Him.’

The smile vanished from De Rohan’s face, and a look of pain came into his eyes; for an instant his lower lip trembled, but he caught it between his teeth and did not answer till his voice was steady.

‘I don’t,’ he said. The words were scarcely audible.

‘Then, if it should be as you think, God help you.’

De Rohan did not reply, perhaps he could not. He lay back on the sofa, with his hands clasped under his dark hair, and swung one foot lightly to and fro over the carpet.

Josslyn stood on the hearthrug with his back to the fire. His mind was too full of anxious thought for him to feel the silence embarrassing this time. It lasted several minutes, then the clock struck something, and he was reminded that a space of nearly twenty hours must have elapsed since his companion tasted food.

He went to the sofa, and held out his hand.

‘I don’t like to think of your going back to Paris, alone, and in this state,’ he said. ‘Will you come and stay with me till you are stronger?’

De Rohan grasped the hand held out to him, and pulled himself up on his feet.

‘You are more than kind,’ he said, a glad smile brightening his eyes, ‘but I think not.

You see, I am a person of some consequence in my own part of the world, and I shall have to dispose of my property somehow.'

'There surely need not be any hurry about that?'

'Perhaps not, but I will abide by my resolution and return to-morrow. Good-bye, and thank you.'

'For what?' asked Josslyn, with a smile. The young man's tone was too impressive to refer only to the invitation.

'For everything—coming to see me here most of all. I can never feel again as I did before you came.' Then, suddenly, as if a new idea had occurred to him, he exclaimed, in a lighter tone, 'Will you post a letter for me on your way back?'

'Willingly.'

De Rohan opened a writing-case, and hastily scribbled a few lines, which he enclosed in an envelope and tossed across the table. Josslyn took it up and glanced at the address, half hoping it might be to a clergyman. It was to a solicitor, however, so he consigned it into his

pocket without comment, though he was a little disappointed.

De Rohan came with him to the door, the dog following at his heels.

‘If you should hear the colonel inquiring for Jove, tell him he is with me,’ he said.

‘Shall you take him abroad with you?’ asked Josslyn, surprised.

‘I shall try not to influence him in any way, but if he does come with me I shall be glad. Good-bye.’

CHAPTER V.

THE CRISIS.

‘WHERE have you been all day, Geoff?’

Lady Margaret asked the question of her nephew when he presented himself in the drawing-room, for the first time, just as the short October day was drawing to a close.

‘I can hardly say,’ the young man answered, smiling. ‘I have been completely lost.’

The fresh air and exercise had done him good. His anxiety respecting De Rohan was, for a time, forgotten, and he had been thinking of Violet as he wandered alone in picturesque and solitary places.

‘I wish I could get completely lost somewhere,’ said Daisy, almost pathetically.

She was looking up into the young man's deep-set, dark-blue eyes, and noticed that the smile which had passed from his lips still lingered in them. It seemed as if he had brought the sunshine into the room with him, and she wished him to stay.

‘I will take you some day, if you like,’ he said.

‘Would it do for two to go?’ she asked, doubtfully.

‘It would do for me,’ he answered, laughing, and seating himself beside her.

‘If you had had a companion to-day it might have spoilt everything,’ she objected, laughing too, but not very joyously.

‘Not if you had been the companion,’ he retorted, gallantly. ‘We will make the experiment some day—to-morrow, if you like—and, in the meanwhile, will you come with me to ask how Miss Traget is?’

He was, of course, entirely ignorant of the events which had taken place on the previous evening, and could not understand why the hot colour rushed to Daisy's cheek and brow, or

why she was so decided in her refusal to accompany him; but, with his usual kindly instinct, he guessed she would rather he did not know, and asked no awkward questions.

‘Then I must go alone,’ he said, rising. ‘Can I take any message from either of you? To-morrow will be her birthday, you know.’

‘Yes.’ It was Lady Margaret who answered. Daisy was too embarrassed to reply. ‘I will drive there to-morrow though, and be the bearer of my own good wishes. Give her our love, and say we hope she has quite recovered from the fatigue of last night. I suppose you will be in for dinner?’

‘I think not; I dined in a cottage on the outskirts of a wood. What say you, Daisy? Could you subsist on a rasher and fried eggs when we go on our excursion?’

‘Oh, yes,’ enthusiastically.

‘That’s right, and perhaps——’

‘If you mean to see Miss Traget to-night, Geoff,’ interrupted Lady Margaret, ‘you had better go.’ She wished to hear the end of Daisy’s story—the telling of which had been

interrupted by the young man's entrance, and could not be resumed so long as he remained.

He left them, and running up to his dressing-room made a hasty toilet before going out again.

The evening was as fine as the day had been, and often afterwards Geoffrey lingered in thought over the remembrance of that pleasant walk to Violet's home. It was a short walk at best, and surely he hastened unnecessarily. As he stopped to unlatch the garden-gate, it occurred to him that there was an unfamiliar look about the house, but he did not stop to consider the matter. Other signs of change there were, however, which could not be ignored. The door was opened—not by Cupid, but by the tall footman who had superseded him. This functionary conducted Geoffrey to the drawing-room, and left him there, saying he would tell his mistress.

Geoffrey had been in the room only once before. Mr. Traget had taken him in one evening a week or two ago to show him a rough sketch of his Australian home. He had hardly

noticed anything except the sketch on that occasion, but had carried away a general impression of bare walls and very little furniture. The apartment in which he now found himself far surpassed in grandeur any other in Hillcrest, yet it did not present the aspect of comfort and cheerfulness which was the great charm of Lady Margaret's drawing-room. It felt damp and chilly, though there was a bright fire burning in the grate, and a faint odour of paste and paint mingled with the fragrance of roses, and added needless testimony to the fact that everything was new. There was more colour than one usually sees in an English drawing-room, but everything had been chosen and arranged with the most perfect taste. Miss Traget had herself, in spite of her delicate health, inspected everything as it arrived, and had assigned it a place. The walls were still somewhat bare, but the few pictures hung against them were masterpieces, and the rough Australian sketch had been banished.

Geoffrey had plenty of leisure to look about him, and note the changes which had taken

place, for nearly half-an-hour elapsed before the servant returned to say Miss Traget would see him in the morning-room. He had by this time become quite interested in the recent decorations, and during his progress up-stairs observed that the hall had been painted and that there was a new stair-carpet.

He was wondering what it all betokened when the servant ushered him into a room, the full splendour of which was veiled by the deepening twilight. He could perceive, however, that it was even more brilliant and bright in colour than the one downstairs. The fire was a glowing mass of scarlet cinders, and the scent of heliotrope was almost overpowering.

Miss Traget lay on a sofa attired in an exquisite, long, loose robe—that might, possibly, be styled a tea-gown—it was very light in texture, and a daring display of brilliant shades. She did not rise, but leaned forward as the young man entered and gave him her hand, saying, in a tone of languid sweetness,

‘This is very kind of you.’

Geoffrey slightly pressed the jewelled fingers

and inquired if she were better. But Violet had turned to address the servant.

‘Draw the curtains, George, and light the candles.’

The young man proceeded to obey as soon as he discovered the remark was intended for him. He had been baptised William, but Miss Traget, who did not choose that he should bear the same name as her father, had elected to call him George, and he had not yet got accustomed to the change. He was far from being all that could be desired as a footman, but his present mistress had selected him from a crowd of other applicants on account of his superior stature, and because he had been recommended by a countess.

No word was spoken whilst he lighted an extravagant number of candles, which were placed beneath coloured shades in different parts of the room, but as he was retiring Violet requested him to acquaint his master of Mr. Wriothesley’s visit. Not, by any means, that she wanted her father to appear on the scene. Her one desire was to have Geoffrey to herself

for an hour or so ; but she wished him to understand that there must be no more familiar intercourse such as she had previously allowed to pass between them.

This was the situation she had toiled for during all the long, weary days when paper-hangers and painters invaded every room, and she had to submit to frequent consultations with servants, and tiresome visits of upholsterers. Everything had chanced just as she hoped it might. Geoffrey had kept away whilst the decorating and cleaning were in progress, and now, when the house was beautiful, he called at the twilight hour, and found her, arrayed in her gossamer robe, looking even more than usually lovely.

When they were left alone she did not speak immediately ; but lay back on her couch, gazing at her rings as the stones caught the reflection of the candle. And now came the first flaw in the proceedings—Geoffrey did not speak either.

The gorgeous apartment and the lady's cold reception had alike failed to render the young

man uncomfortable. In point of fact, he felt much more at ease than Violet did. He liked pretty things, and had been used to them all his life. But, though ready to admit that his present surroundings were beautiful, and far from admiring the disorder in which his friends had formerly lived, he missed the air of homely comfort which had once belonged to Mr. Traget's house.

At length Violet was constrained to look at him. He had seated himself, though she had not invited him to do so. He had, however, so long been accustomed to do as he liked at the Tragets', that the circumstance of the chairs being now covered with satin instead of horse-hair had not proved a sufficient deterrent to his taking one. Evidently he did not feel the need of conversation, and, for an instant, Violet too was silent.

In spite of all that she had heard and seen she still loved him, and shrank from uttering words which would put an end to his, hitherto, frequent visits. Yet he had deceived her cruelly. She knew now that when he was

constantly seeking her society, and teaching her to believe that she was dear to him, he had given his heart away to a little girl who, as she fancied, would have been just as pleased with the love of any other man.

But this was the last time they were to sit together as seeming friends, and she was determined he should not leave her without a pang of regret. She must break the silence.

‘Is Lady Margaret quite well?’ she asked.

Geoffrey replied that his aunt was quite well, and then, the pleasant reverie in which he had been indulging being ended, proceeded to give her an account of his day’s wanderings.

‘I am to go again some day and take Daisy,’ he said, at the conclusion of his recital.

‘And realise the dreams you have been dreaming to-day?’ she asked, with a smile. She had got the better of her feelings now, and had listened to him with the most engaging attentiveness.

‘Not exactly,’ he said, and if her mind had not been so perverted by jealousy she might have understood his meaning; for his love was

written clearly on his open face. She failed to see it, however, and only said indifferently,

‘You admit that you have been dreaming then?’

‘Oh, yes. Will you come when I take Daisy?’

‘You forget I cannot,’ she said, almost sharply; so great was the pain she had to hide. Then, seeing an expression of sympathy pass over the young man’s face, she added, quickly, ‘Besides, I don’t think I care for sylvan solitude.’

‘I have not found it solitary.’

‘That is because you have been too busy castle-building.’

‘Couldn’t you build castles?’ he asked, smiling.

‘No, they always fall down just before completion.’

‘That’s because your foundation is not sure.’

‘Is yours?’

‘I hope so.’

‘Once I thought mine was, but now my castle is a heap of ruins.’ Her eyes were fixed upon

him as she made this declaration, and, for an instant, she almost wavered. Surely she could be making no mistake. He looked the very embodiment of truth and honour.

‘Let me help you to up-rear it,’ he said, not wholly in jest.

‘We’ll see, presently,’ she replied, with a smile, and then added, in a tone of playful inquiry, ‘When do you intend to take Miss Daisy to this sylvan retreat?’

‘I’ll leave her to fix the day. I am always at her service.’

‘That must be very pleasant for her,’ she said, amiably. ‘I hope you will be happy.’

‘There is no fear of our not being,’ he answered, thinking only of the day to be spent in the woods. ‘Daisy and I have known each other too long to fall out.’

‘I did not know that a long acquaintance-ship assured immunity from quarrels.’

Again she spoke sharply, for now her worst fears were realised. He had been trifling with her, and all the time he intended to ask Daisy to be his wife. Doubtless, too, the girl had

observed the evident delight she took in the young man's society, and triumphed over her in secret, knowing she held her lover safe. Yes, both had seen her joy; but none should guess at her despair.

Whilst these thoughts were running through her mind she scarcely heard what reply Geoffrey was making, but as soon as he ceased to speak she leaned back on her couch and said, with a suspicion of contempt in her voice,

‘So you think you have built a castle; I should call it a very small cottage.’

‘You speak in riddles to-night,’ he said, laughing, ‘and I cannot guess their meaning.’

‘Ah! you are dull this evening. Live in your cottage by all means, and try and persuade yourself it is a palace.’

In spite of her resolve, her wretchedness betrayed itself in the bitterness of her tone. Geoffrey was silent, trying to comprehend her extraordinary mood. Presently she spoke again.

‘I wish father would come.’

‘You are tired,’ the young man said, penitently, thinking he divined the cause of her strange-

ness. 'Forgive me, I ought not to have stayed so long.'

She forced a smile.

'No, I don't want you to go. I have spent a very lonely day—one of many,' she added, after a pause.

'We must look you up better in future,' he said, also smiling. 'Aunt Margaret said she was coming to see you to-morrow—may I come with her?'

'Certainly; father and Josslyn will be glad to see you.'

'And you—won't you be glad.'

'Of course; I am always pleased to see my friends.'

She could not prevent the hot colour rushing into her cheeks as she made this admission, and Geoffrey, perhaps not unnaturally, attributed the blush to a wrong cause.

'I will come,' he said, with a look of pleasure. 'But I should like to be the first to wish you joy. I have not forgotten what day to-morrow is.'

'No doubt I shall be very happy to-morrow.'

‘I hope so,’ he replied, detecting the ring of scorn in her voice, and attributing it to weariness. ‘Will you wear this sometimes?’ he added. ‘It is very old-fashioned, but it belonged to my mother, and I should like you to have it.’ He took the bracelet from its case as he spoke, and held it out to her.

She scarcely looked at it, but lifted her eyes to his face, and studied his expression attentively, whilst saying,

‘You are very kind, but I really cannot accept anything that I am sure you must prize so highly.’

‘If I did not prize it highly I should not offer it to you,’ he said, with a convincing smile.

‘You are really very kind, and I hope you will not think me ungracious if I refuse to accept it.’

‘But why should you refuse?’ he demanded, and she had the satisfaction of seeing him look disappointed as he dropped the bracelet into its case again.

‘It might lead to further misunderstanding,’ she said, looking away from him.

‘Has there been misunderstanding?’ he inquired, with his eyes still fixed upon her face.

‘Yes.’ Just this one simple monosyllable, and she dared not add to it lest she might inadvertently betray her secret.

Geoffrey was silent from very astonishment. He had felt absolutely certain of her love, and now he did not know what to think. Before he found his voice again, Mr. Traget entered the room.

Violet was unfeignedly glad to see her father now, however unwelcome his presence might have been earlier. She felt her strength had been tried to the utmost, and was thankful it no longer rested with her to make conversation. But after a very cordial hand-shaking, and the usual remarks on the weather, the two gentlemen seemed equally incapable of speech. Mr. Traget saw that something had occurred, and heartily wished he had remained downstairs, and Geoffrey’s only desire was to get away. He was unexpectedly helped to accomplish this.

An awkward silence, which had lasted for several minutes, was broken by the entrance of

the footman, who carried a silver salver in his hand, with a yellow envelope upon it.

‘A telegram for you, sir,’ he said, addressing himself to Geoffrey. ‘Your servant is waiting below.’

Geoffrey took it up.

‘Excuse me a moment,’ he said, turning to Violet; and then, going to one of the candles, tore it open.

Both father and daughter watched his face anxiously whilst he read. There were only a few words on the bit of pink paper, but they were all important.

‘Peter Heywood, Wriothlesley Towers, to Geoffrey Wriothlesley, Esq., Hillcrest.—Sir Ralph was found dead in the library an hour ago. Come at once.’

The young man looked greatly shocked when he turned again to his friends.

‘Not bad news, I hope?’ said Mr. Traget, solicitously.

‘Yes.’ He spoke mechanically. ‘My uncle is dead.’

‘Not Colonel Shakerley?’ exclaimed Mr. Traget, in a tone of consternation.

‘Oh, no ; Sir Ralph.’

Geoffrey had always had a liking for the solitary old man whom no one loved, and the news of his sudden death affected him deeply ; but, for all that, he answered with a feeling of relief. The colonel was as dear to him as his own father could have been.

‘Good-bye,’ he said, approaching Violet. ‘I must go at once.’

‘Good-bye,’ she said, giving him her hand.

When he released it after, as she thought, hardly touching it, she could have cried, for the familiar pressure she knew she must feel no more.

Mr. Traget followed the young man from the room, uncertain whether he ought to offer him congratulation or sympathy. He was, however, spared the necessity of doing either, for Geoffrey, who had completely forgotten his existence, let himself out at the hall-door, mounted his servant’s horse, and rode rapidly away.

As soon as she was alone Violet picked up the

telegram, which Geoffrey had left lying on her couch, and drawing a light towards her, read it carefully. Then she leaned back and abandoned herself to thought. Geoffrey was a baronet at last. This was the thing which interested her. The old man's sudden death was nothing—less than nothing—to her, except in so far as it affected the fortunes of his heir.

‘Sir Geoffrey and Lady Wriothsesley.’ A faint blush dyed her cheeks as she murmured the names almost audibly. ‘How well they sounded, and but for Daisy——’

Her reflections were interrupted by the entrance of Josslyn.

The young man had walked home very slowly from the ‘Eagle and Child,’ with his mind full of the troubles which had befallen Daisy and De Rohan. Much as he desired to help them there was nothing he could do, beyond telling Daisy the truth about the duel. But he could now think of many things he might have said to cheer De Rohan, and regretted having let the time go by when he might have tried to bring him to a better frame of mind.

‘I am afraid I have neglected you shamefully to-day, Vi,’ he said, taking the chair Geoffrey had just vacated.

‘Yes ; where have you been?’

‘With De Rohan. Poor fellow, he feels the breaking off of his engagement very keenly.’

‘To whom was he engaged?’ she asked, indifferently.

‘To Miss Shakerley. I thought you knew.’

‘To Daisy Shakerley,’ she exclaimed, springing up from her couch, and regarding him almost wildly. ‘Was not she engaged to Mr. Wriothesley? Speak.’

She was breathless with impatience, and trembling from head to foot.

Josslyn looked at her in amazement.

‘Certainly not ; but, Violet——’

‘Oh, what a fool I have been,’ she almost shrieked, and with a cry of despair flung herself back on the couch.

Josslyn bent over her for a second, and then dashed to the bell and rung it violently.

His sister had fainted.

CHAPTER VI.

FURTHER EVIDENCE.

CHRISTMAS was past, and at Hillcrest the festive season had been kept in the time-honoured way, with feasting and rejoicing in every home. At the Hall there had been no exception to the general rule, yet Lady Margaret and Daisy both agreed that it was the most melancholy Christmas they had ever known.

Perhaps Geoffrey's continued absence had something to do in bringing about the expression of this opinion. The young man, who had always managed to spend Christmas with them before, had, on this occasion, been obliged to write and say that as everybody seemed to expect him to stop at Wriothesley Towers he had decided to do so. His letter was full of good wishes and kind remembrances for all; but it was, nevertheless, a bitter disappointment.

Daisy had even been found in tears, sitting on the top of a very small step-ladder surrounded by a small cart-load of evergreens with which she was endeavouring to decorate the rooms. She felt so very solitary as she sat there alone, in the dusk of the early winter evening, and called to mind the merry time they had had last year—and indeed every year that she could remember—when Geoffrey had been there to do all the climbing and she had only to hand up branches of holly and mistletoe.

What laughing and joking there had been over it, to be sure, and now she was left entirely to herself. Lady Margaret was far from well, and had to keep quiet in her own room almost continually; and it was probably many years since the colonel had spent a ‘merry Christmas,’ or taken any interest in the usual festivities. Even Bernard, who had always helped on former occasions, failed her now.

Indeed, the boy was greatly changed. He was growing more moping and silent every day, and his parents were very anxious and despondent about him—all the more so because it was a subject never openly alluded to between

them. Lady Margaret attributed the change to Geoffrey's absence, and in a measure she was right; but only in a measure. No one ever imagined how the poor fellow mourned for the friend, who, for so short a time, had brought a new light and interest into his life. His happiest hours had been spent with De Rohan, and he missed him sorely.

It was Josslyn who found Daisy sitting alone on the little step-ladder, and he soon made her feel more cheerful. They had not seen much of each other lately. Josslyn was obliged to be from home a good deal now; but he came to spend a few days with his father and Violet at Christmas, and seized the earliest opportunity to carry his good wishes to the Hall. They met without embarrassment. Indeed, Daisy found the young man much better company than she used to do, for he was not nearly so shy with her now as formerly. He was almost as clever at decorating as Geoffrey, and very soon they were as merry as crickets.

The colonel came in and found them busy, and the sight of them together afforded him some little satisfaction. The satisfaction was

almost forgotten when Josslyn declined to eat his Christmas dinner with them, saying he must really spend that day at home, but he comforted himself, as best he could, with the assurance that before another Christmas came round the young man's home would be under his own roof. For he still held to his old belief respecting Josslyn, and was eagerly awaiting the day when he might own him for his son. He had taken his old friend Dr. Lawton into confidence, and the doctor had promised to give him all the help he could.

‘And I have no doubt, Shakerley,’ the little man had said, after listening to the story with unflagging attention, ‘but that I shall be able to unearth something. I see new people every day, and, better still,’ am continually coming across old friends.’

The colonel returned home from this interview much encouraged, and, for a time, was almost cheerful; but as week after week passed by, and the doctor made no sign, he grew despondent again. Lady Margaret and Daisy wondered secretly at his gloomy expression and

irritability ; whilst his neighbours and servants openly commented on his ill-humour

There is an old saying to the effect that when things get to the worst they begin to mend, and in this instance it was verified.

The doctor arrived one evening early in March, quite unexpectedly, and found his friends at dinner. It was a very silent party. Lady Margaret had done her best to make conversation, but no one responded to her efforts, and she was obliged to desist. Several minutes passed without a single remark being exchanged, and then the door was opened, just wide enough to admit the doctor's head, whilst he asked, in cheery tones,

‘Will you allow a dusty wayfarer to take a seat at your table, Lady Margaret?’

‘Yes, indeed, Dr. Lawton,’ exclaimed Lady Margaret, with so much genuine pleasure the little man felt quite flattered,

He was a great talker, and had plenty of gossip to relate—all of it good-natured, and some of it witty. He could tell capital stories about nearly all the great men of the day, and

very rarely repeated himself, though he was sometimes accused of invention.

Lady Margaret lingered at table longer than usual, it was such a treat to hear some one speak cheerfully, and after the recent dearth of conversation, the doctor's remarks were things to revel in. But it was not until she had retired and he found himself alone with the colonel that the doctor prepared to unbosom himself of the one subject of real interest which had brought him to Hillcrest.

The colonel had shown no impatience, though he was curious to know what his friend had to relate. He had been well pleased to see his wife amused, and even now his first question was of her.

‘How do you think Lady Margaret is looking, Lawton?’ he enquired, anxiously, as they returned to their seats.

‘Well,’ said the doctor, doubtfully, ‘not very strong, and rather low-spirited, eh?’ Then, without giving his companion time to reply, he added, in his usual blithe tone, ‘But we shall soon see her cheerful now.’

‘You have heard something, then?’ the colonel said, eagerly.

‘Yes; not much that we did not know before, perhaps, but still something.’ The doctor helped himself to some walnuts, and placed one between the crackers deliberately. ‘I was at a dinner-party—let me see, to-day is Tuesday, it would be last Friday—given by our old friend Major Muftedd. You remember Muftedd?’

‘Perfectly; but never mind him now.’

The doctor smiled.

‘He told me I should meet an old flame of mine—Lizzie Norris. She remembered me very well, and we had a pleasant chat about old times. It seems she went as governess with a family to Australia, and has been abroad several years. She is married—very comfortably, I fancy. Her husband was with her.’

The colonel, who had been growing impatient during the preamble, now said,

‘I don’t see what this has to do with Traget.’

The doctor smiled again, and cracked his walnut.

‘She went to Australia,’ he said, carefully

dividing the kernel from the shell, 'and, as I promised always to keep your affair in mind, I at once set myself to find out when she sailed, thinking it might possibly be when Traget did. It was.'

'But she couldn't be expected to remember everyone who chanced to sail with her.'

'Not everyone, certainly,' replied the doctor, tranquilly. 'But don't you see, my dear fellow, Traget was very peculiarly placed—a good-looking widower, under forty, with a beautiful infant. What unmarried lady would not be interested, or indeed any lady? Take Lady Margaret, for instance. Don't you suppose she would want to nurse the baby?'

The colonel smiled.

'Well,' he said. 'You say she remembered Traget?'

'She recollected Mr. Traget perfectly, and his dear little girl! Those were her words.'

'And no mention of a boy?'

'I had to work round to that. She did not say anything about the boy of her own accord; but when I said Mr. Traget was now in

England with his daughter, and I believed a son, and asked her if she remembered the boy, she replied that she did, and volunteered the information that "he was not such a sweet child as his sister, he was older and would not be friendly with strangers, and he used to scream frightfully if left alone in the dark." '

'The description does not suit Louis,' said the colonel, gravely. 'He was a most engaging lad, and did not know what fear meant.'

'You must bear in mind,' replied the doctor, not less gravely, 'that he had been taken from his home at an age when he was quite old enough to resent the injustice of it; and, I imagine, some very powerful means must have been resorted to in order to prevent him talking about it.'

The colonel leaned forward with his head upon his hand, and appeared to be thinking deeply. Presently he looked up and exclaimed,

'I say, Lawton, it is a dastardly business. I don't think Traget would be capable of it.'

'I can't say. You know him better than I do, but the evidence is strong against him,

and you say he bore you no good will at the time.'

'We were not friends, certainly; but the quarrel, as I told you, had only arisen out of some remarks of mine made at the time he threw up his profession. I thought he was making a mistake, and said so very plainly.'

'Undoubtedly he was making a mistake; but he must have resented your interference very strongly, for all that. You remember what the station-master told you?'

'Of course; but there was a good deal of conjecture in what he said. He could not positively affirm that the coat was wrapped round a child.'

'No, but he did positively affirm that Traget was here the night your boy disappeared, and whatever he took away with him was taken on that night.'

'Yes, but he had been visiting his old home for the last time. He may, perhaps, have come across some forgotten treasure which he wished to have with him.'

'He may; but I think not. Listen to this. I

have at present a patient named Mason, who used to be servant to Dr. Wilford. I daresay you would know Wilford, he was a great friend of Traget's.'

'I have seen him several times. He used to drink, I think.'

The doctor smiled.

'That is like you, Shakerley. He did drink sometimes, but he was a clever fellow, and not a bad-hearted fellow either, though what I am about to tell you does not reflect much to his credit. I was talking to my patient about him the other day, and, bearing in mind the subject in which you are interested, asked him if he remembered Mr. Traget. He did remember him, and after a little judicious questioning I elicited the following information. On the night before he sailed, Traget called on Wilford, soon after ten o'clock, the man says—that means he must have gone there straight from here, comparing this account with your station-master's.'

'Yes,' replied the colonel, impatient to hear more.

‘He drove up to the house in a cab from the station, and had a child with him, wrapped in a light grey overcoat. He was carrying it very carefully, and asked for the doctor. The man, supposing there had been an accident, showed him into the surgery and sent his master to him there. They were together for a little while, and then called for hot water. Mason, who confesses to having felt curious, took it, hoping to see what was going on. Wilford, however, met him at the door, and he only saw that the child, a boy—he thinks about five or six years old—was lying, partially undressed, on the table; the gas was turned up, and there was a peculiar smell in the room. He says several hours passed, and then both he and the housekeeper heard the child sobbing. He gave me to understand that the sobbing continued for an hour or more, till the woman was nearly distracted, and kept putting her fingers in her ears and saying, “Oh, that poor child, whatever are they doing to him?” When he became quiet, Wilford told Mason to fetch a cab, he thinks that was about four o’clock, and shortly after Traget went away in it, taking the child with him.’

During the latter part of this narrative, the colonel had been pacing backwards and forwards across the room. He appeared to be greatly agitated.

‘What do you suppose they were doing to the lad, Lawton?’ he now asked, stopping and confronting the doctor.

‘I haven’t the ghost of a notion,’ Dr. Lawton replied. ‘Not much, perhaps. If he had had chloroform that would probably make him cry, and, whatever it was, he has had time enough to get over it.’

The colonel sighed, and went back to his seat.

‘It is the most unaccountable thing I ever heard,’ he said. ‘He must have taken the lad abroad with him as his own son.’

‘It would seem so from what Mrs. Gould—that is, Lizzie Norris—said.’

They were both silent for several seconds, then the colonel asked,

‘When should you advise me to see Traget?’

‘I think if you will be content to wait a bit it would be as well. He may prove awkward, and will, doubtless, have his own tale to tell. I

think it likely that, even if he is forced to admit the young man is not his own son, he will deny he is yours. And, you see, both Mrs. Gould and Mason make the lad much older than your boy was.'

'Oh, as for that, Louis was a remarkably fine child. I don't think we need make ourselves uneasy on that head, and, as for waiting, I don't see what further evidence we can get.'

'Not much, certainly. Wilford died several years ago, and I don't suppose he would have helped us had he been living; but there is the housekeeper. I got her address from Mason. She is married, and is living in Plymouth. I will see her for you to-morrow, if you like. She would at any rate be able to confirm what Mason says.'

'Yes; thanks, but it is giving you a deal of trouble.'

'Don't mention that. I am very glad to help you. Suppose we go to the ladies now. If you have anything more to say, we can talk in the morning.'

CHAPTER VII.

THE MASTER OF WRIOTHESLEY TOWERS.

CONSIDERING it had been so very short Dr. Lawton's visit certainly did wonders for his friends at Hillcrest, and no one benefited more than the colonel. He was as silent as before, but it was now evident that his silence proceeded from perplexing, though presumedly not unpleasing, thoughts rather than from ill-humour. He confided the doctor's discovery to no one, though from time to time there would come over him an almost irresistible longing to unbosom himself to his wife. He took more pride and pleasure in her beauty than anyone imagined, and longed to banish the look of sadness from her face, and to see her as happy and cheerful as she once had been. But he waited to make sure of everything before allowing himself to speak.

Lady Margaret also derived good from the doctor's visit, and displayed the most unwonted energy during the few days that immediately followed his departure. She returned the numerous calls her friends had made, generally taking Daisy with her for companionship ; but one afternoon she even succeeded in dragging the colonel himself off to pay a visit to the Higleys.

Daisy was asked to accompany them, but excused herself, pleading that she wanted to finish a book which she professed to be interested in. In reality, she had come to dread being interviewed by Mrs. Higley, for since her birthday-party they had never met without that lady asking some embarrassing question about Count de Rohan.

Now, having watched her uncle and aunt drive away, she soon discovered the story was stupid, and resolved to go for a ride. It was an exercise she had always been fond of, though of late she had indulged in it but little. It was one thing, she said, to ride with Geoffrey, and quite another to ride with only the groom in attendance.

Geoffrey had been her instructor in this, as in most other things, and was very proud of her riding. He was always glad to be her companion when he was at home.

The girl missed him sadly. She had never accustomed herself to act on her own responsibility, and now never a day passed but she felt a need of his guidance. True, she had her aunt to appeal to in any pressing difficulty, but that was not sufficient. She wanted some one who could sympathise with all her pursuits and pleasures as well as her perplexities, and Lady Margaret was too grave and serious for this.

Certainly the young man could not have been away at a worse time. For now she had a secret trouble which she could confide to no one, and it was necessary that her mind should be relieved from constantly dwelling upon it. Only very slowly the knowledge had come to her that she had made a life's mistake in refusing Josslyn's love. She had been so blinded by De Rohan's romantic fondness for her that, for a time, she had failed to realise Josslyn's real worth and manliness ; but as the months passed

by and the recollection of the young count became more and more indistinct—nay, it was surprising how soon she could forget him now he was no longer near to charm her with his native good-humour and boyish brightness—she knew that Josslyn was the man she loved. She knew also that she had bound him to silence, and that she could never again send him the token he had asked for.

This thought it was which, in spite of her effort not to be made unhappy, had stolen the roses from her cheeks, and robbed her of her girlish light-heartedness and repose of spirit.

Yet, once more, notwithstanding this, and other minor trials, such as the presence of the groom, she had a pleasant ride. The wintry sun shone bravely all the afternoon, the wind was fresh, though boisterous, and the air invigorating. When she reached home again she looked more like the Daisy of last summer than like the quiet girl who had left the house an hour or two ago.

As she crossed the dim hall she sang gaily the chorus of an old hunting-song which Geoffrey

used to sing in the holidays when he was a boy. But at the drawing-room door she stopped abruptly—footsteps and song alike arrested—for a young man stood upon the hearthrug with his back towards her. He turned round as she paused, and a glad smile of welcome lighted up his face, though he made no move towards her.

For an instant she stood irresolute, looking like a picture, framed by the low doorway, whilst the dusky hall behind formed a perfect back-ground, with here and there a gleam of light where a flickering blaze from the almost burnt-out fire was reflected on one of the suits of shining armour. Certainly she had never looked more lovely: a rich glow was mantling on her cheeks, a wonderful gladness was dancing in her eyes, and her golden hair was blown loose by the boisterous wind.

It was not surprising the young man on the hearthrug should be content to watch her. But it was only for a second that she so stood, and then with a joyful cry, ‘Geoff, is it really you?’ she sprang towards him.

‘Yes, really,’ he said, and put his arm round

her waist as he bent and kissed her cheek. 'So you are pleased to see me back again, Daisy?'

'Yes, indeed,' she said.

And then, stepping back from him about an arm's length, she looked up into his face and was perplexed by the change she saw there. Not quite five months had passed since he went away, and now what had come to him? He did not look older, or thinner, or paler; yet he was quite different. After due consideration, Daisy suddenly exclaimed,

'Why, Geoff, I do believe you have grown melancholy.'

He laughed.

'Wriothesley Towers isn't a very cheerful place to live in, Daisy.'

'Why, I thought it was magnificent.'

'It is very big and grand, but it is more than half a century since a lady lived there, and—well, what's amusing you?' He broke off to ask the question, for the girl had interrupted him with quite a peal of merry laughter.

'Oh, nothing,' she said, recovering, 'only if you could just have seen yourself, you did look

so disgusted. However, it is something to know we add to your comfort.'

He smiled, and passed his arm round her again, saying.

'I am afraid you and Aunt Maggie have spoilt me for a bachelor, Daisy.'

'Well, the remedy lies in your own hands.'

'I'm not so sure of that,' he said, and was silent for a time.

He was thinking of Violet, as he had so often thought of her whilst he had been away. If she had only loved him, as he had once fondly believed she did, with what different feelings would he have regarded his home. Instead of spending the slow, melancholy weeks since he came into possession in one dingy back room, without even caring to look into the others, he would have been delightfully busy—planning and scheming to make the old place look cheerful and home-like. But what he would so gladly have done for her he did not care to do for himself.

All his life he had been accustomed to the society of ladies, and at Wriothesley Towers had

missed his aunt and Daisy more than anyone would have supposed; yet never until this moment did it occur to him that he might ask Daisy to share his home—never once, during all those long winter evenings which he had spent alone in his gloomy study, trying to picture to himself the dear old drawing-room at Hillcrest—now it flashed into his mind like an inspiration.

Was he to spend all his life in vain regret because one woman was indifferent to him? Why not ask Daisy to be his wife? He loved her—with a love wholly unlike the love with which he had loved Violet, it is true, but none the less real. That was all hot and passionate and lover-like; this was calm and brotherly.

Now the idea had once got into his head it took possession of him entirely, and he could not banish it. He was pleased to think how Daisy and her belongings would brighten his gloomy mansion. She was a young lady who would always make her presence felt in a house. Some people, not so good-natured as Geoffrey, might have called her untidy. He rather liked to see her pretty bits of unfinished needlework

lying about, and did not object to finding her music, books, and gloves in the most unlikely places.

He thought how different it would be to return home after a day's absence and find her there, and a smile flitted across his face as he almost fancied he could hear her sweet voice welcoming him.

‘There, now you look better,’ said the real Daisy, breaking in upon his reverie. ‘What are you thinking about? You haven’t spoken for nearly ten minutes.’

‘I was wondering,’ he replied, gravely, ‘if anything I could say would induce you to become the mistress of Wriothesley Towers.’

‘Induce me?’ in a tone of great surprise.

‘Yes; is it so very preposterous?’

It seemed to be, for she had nothing to say; but stood gently lashing her beautiful riding-habit with her whip, and looking very bewildered. She had been so confident of her cousin’s attachment to Violet, and he had left Hillcrest so suddenly after his last visit to her, she had not discovered that anything had gone wrong.

‘I thought,’ she said at last, ‘you meant to ask some one else.’

‘So did I, once; but never mind that now. I was mistaken.’

‘I think not,’ she said, and then stopped, remembering she ought not to betray Violet’s secret even if she had guessed it aright.

‘We are very fond of one another, Daisy,’ he pleaded, ‘and I am almost sure I could make you happy.’

She did not doubt that. She had known him all her life, and had never had one unkind word from him, nor had he once failed to help her when she had appealed to him in any difficulty. She knew also that her uncle and aunt would be pleased if she accepted his offer. So, for a little while, she wavered, and it may be that during those few moments of indecision they were both very near to happiness.

Not even Josslyn could be dearer to her than Geoffrey, and yet it was her secret love for him that at last determined her answer.

‘I think it would be better not, Geoff,’ she said.

He looked disappointed ; much more so than she had expected he would be.

‘Why?’ he asked.

‘I should not satisfy you.’

‘Let me be the judge of that,’ he exclaimed, eagerly.

‘No, no, Geoff,’ she entreated: ‘believe me, we are better as we are.’

‘I’m not better as I am,’ he protested, taking both her hands in his. ‘Why cannot you love me, Daisy?’

‘I do,’ she said ; then hesitated, and her colour deepened. ‘Yes, I will tell you,’ she murmured, shyly. ‘I love some one else—not better ; but differently, you know.’ Again she paused ; then smiled as she concluded, confidently, ‘And so do you, dear.’

‘I don’t,’ he said, vehemently ; and at the time it was true. ‘I love you better than any lady in the land.’

‘At present,’ nodding her head at him gravely. Then, he looked so serious, she was forced to add, coaxingly, ‘Be my friend, Geoff, as you have always been.’

He did not reply immediately. Just then friendship seemed such a poor thing.

‘Promise me,’ she pleaded, with tears in her eyes. ‘I am not very happy now, and if I lose you too——’

The sentence was not very explicit, but it won him over. If she were in any trouble he must not desert her.

‘Of course you won’t lose me,’ he said, with a smile. ‘We will be the best of friends, Daisy ; since friendship is all you have to give me.’

He kissed her, and she dried her eyes and smiled, telling him he was very good. Then several minutes passed in unbroken silence, for he could not so soon recover from his disappointment. Daisy was sorry for him, but judged it best to say nothing until he spoke again. When he did speak she wondered what train of thought had preceded his remark.

‘Seeing we are to be friends—the best of friends,’ he said—‘will you tell me, Daisy, did any recollection of De Rohan prompt your answer?’

He still looked very grave, and awaited her reply even more anxiously than he had done

before. A flush of crimson swept across the girl's cheek and brow ; but she answered him readily, being confident he would not question her thus to satisfy any feeling of idle curiosity.

‘He had nothing to do with it, Geoff,’ she said.

They could not pursue the subject, even had they wished to, for at that instant the colonel and Lady Margaret entered the room.

‘Geoffrey,’ they exclaimed, simultaneously.

‘You dear boy to give us such a pleasant surprise,’ said his aunt, embracing him, or, more correctly speaking, allowing herself to be embraced.

‘It’s very kind of you to put it in that way,’ he said. ‘I was half afraid of being called to account for staying away so long.’

‘And I’m not so sure but what you will be by and by,’ said the colonel, shaking him warmly by the hand.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DOCTOR'S LETTER.

‘HAVE you heard anything of De Rohan lately?’ asked Geoffrey.

It was the day after his return, and he and Lady Margaret were together in the drawing-room. He had spent the morning with the colonel who had told him of Dr. Lawton’s discovery. This had, naturally enough, set him thinking of De Rohan and of his own fancy concerning him, and now he wished to learn what were Lady Margaret’s feelings with regard to the young man.

‘Not lately,’ she said, carefully matching a needleful of silk with some already worked into her embroidery. ‘I believe he has gone back to Paris.’

She did not seem inclined to pursue the con-

versation, but Geoffrey was not at all satisfied.

‘I know he has gone back,’ he said, after a short silence. ‘I don’t very well see what else he could do.’

‘No; it was perhaps inevitable, but I am afraid he will come to no good. His friends there seem to be the most undesirable acquaintances a young man could well have.’

‘I wish he could have stayed here,’ said Geoffrey, heartily.

Lady Margaret laughed.

‘Whatever faults he may have had, he certainly seemed to win the heart of everyone he came across.’

‘But not yours?’

‘Yes; even I was not proof against him when he was here.’

‘Then I wish you would ask him to come again.’

‘Impossible,’ regarding him with astonishment. ‘After what passed between him and Daisy you must know that, and then I did not like his influence over Bernard. The boy was perfectly infatuated with him.’

‘I cannot think he would do Bernard any intentional harm.’

‘Not intentional, perhaps ; but I am afraid he is frivolous and unprincipled, and, being so, his engaging manners only make him a more dangerous companion for young people.’

Geoffrey rose. If this was the expression of her true feeling he could say no more ; but silence had become almost intolerable. For, notwithstanding all the colonel had told him respecting Josslyn, he still believed De Rohan to be Louis Shakerley, and knew that a day must come when Lady Margaret would be very sorry because of her harsh judgment. However, it was impossible to get the young man invited back to Hillcrest without disclosing all he suspected ; so, as he still shrank from breaking the miserable promise he had given to Roger Warwick, he was forced to let the subject drop. For several seconds neither of them spoke. Then Lady Margaret looked up from her work.

‘You said you were going out shooting this afternoon. Will you take Bernard with you?’ she asked.

‘Willingly,’ he answered, as cheerfully as he could for his disappointment, and went in search of the boy

Bernard was delighted. He was not allowed to carry a gun himself, and it was rarely anyone expressed a desire for his company. He set off in high good-humour, and, for a wonder, did most of the talking.

The afternoon was drawing to a close, and Lady Margaret had been alone since her nephew left her; but, just as she was beginning to find her own thoughts poor company, the colonel entered the room. He had an open letter in his hand, and every trace of discontent and sadness had been driven from his face by the joyful news it contained.

He came up to his wife and seated himself in a low chair beside her, spreading the open letter on his knee, but keeping his hand upon it to prevent her reading what was written.

‘Can you hear some very good news without getting excited, Maggie?’ he asked.

‘Oh, yes,’ she answered, cheerfully, ‘if you are quite sure it is good news.’

‘I am quite sure of that,’ he replied, with a smile. ‘It is the very best news possible. Think a moment. What would you like to hear better than anything else?’

She had no need to think. Her one great desire was ever present in her mind—the desire to see her lost child again. She prayed for him daily, and, for sixteen years, had awaited his return with unceasing longing; but now she could not speak of him. For this good news, whatever it might be, could hardly concern him, and she would not destroy the colonel’s pleasure in that which he had to relate.

‘I cannot tell,’ she said.

But even the bare possibility that the intelligence might be of her boy brought a fresh colour to her cheeks, and put a new gladness into her eyes. The colonel saw it, and guessed what was in her mind.

‘You need not be afraid, Maggie,’ he answered. ‘It is the very best.’

‘About our boy?’ she answered, afraid, in spite of his assurances.

For answer he pressed her hand warmly in

his own. Had he spoken, his voice would not have been steady.

‘He is living?’ she asked, with only a slight tremor in hers.

‘Yes; and the lad I would have chosen from amongst a thousand,’ he said, and his eyes were full of tears.

Several seconds passed in unbroken silence, and the colonel could only wonder at his wife’s perfect calm. She had not displayed the least excitement, and the expression of her face was one of sweet thankfulness and joy. He could not understand how this news, which was so extraordinary to him, was in truth no news to her, but simply the realisation of a hope.

‘I knew he was not lost for always,’ she said, and then, after a little while, ‘Tell me about him, Rupert. When shall I see him?’

‘You have seen him,’ he said, and smiled; for this eagerness was more comprehensible to him than her strange composure.

‘Then who is he?’

‘Guess; who of all the young men you know would you choose?’

She thought for a moment, her finger on her lip.

‘It cannot be Josslyn?’

The colonel was surprised.

‘How did you know?’ he asked.

‘Something told me—not now, but long ago—the first time I saw him. It was in the ravine, on the night we came home. I had just seen Roger Warwick there; he was very wild, and frightened me terribly. Josslyn came to my assistance, and brought me home. I told Geoffrey I thought he was Louis.’

‘And yet you said nothing to me,’ the colonel interrupted, reproachfully.

‘No; Geoff persuaded me it was only a fancy, and we both thought it would be better not to say anything about it. But tell me, how did you find it out?’

‘My suspicions were aroused the first night I saw Josslyn, because I knew Traget had no son.’

‘Of course he hadn’t,’ exclaimed Lady Margaret. ‘How strange I never thought of that.’

The colonel smiled.

‘I knew also that he bore me ill-will, and that

he was at Hillcrest the night Louis was lost. The station-master told me he took something away with him, wrapped in his overcoat; and Lawton has found out the rest. This letter contains all that was required to make the matter certain. Listen to what he says;’ and, referring to the letter, he read,

‘DEAR SHAKERLEY,

‘Accept my hearty congratulations along with an account of my mission. The housekeeper—a most respectable woman—remembers everything, but that is not all.

‘At Plymouth, by a lucky chance which I will explain when I see you, I came across the captain of the vessel *Traget* sailed in. We dined together, and I told him all about your lad. The bulk of what he told me must stand over until our next meeting, as I have not time to write at any length, but here is the gist of it. He questioned *Traget* about the children—two, a boy and a girl—and he admitted the boy was not his own son, but said he intended to adopt him.

‘At Naples several of the passengers received letters and papers from friends in England. The papers contained an account of the loss of your lad. Traget betrayed considerable emotion when the matter was first mentioned, over dinner, complained of feeling unwell, and left the table. Afterwards he was found reading the account, and, on being questioned about the extraordinary interest he took in it, explained that you were once a friend of his.

‘The captain described the lad as an “engaging little chap about five years of age, but subject to fits.” Traget seems to have treated him with unfailing kindness.

‘I hope to run down to Hillcrest in a day or two to welcome the restored heir, and, in the meanwhile, with kind regards to Lady Margaret and Miss Daisy, etc.’

‘I am going to see Traget now,’ said the colonel, as he folded the letter. ‘Will you come, or will you wait and see Josslyn here? I believe he came home last night.’

‘I will wait. But, Rupert, I cannot know all yet. What did Dr. Lawton tell you when he was here? We must not make any mistake about it.’

‘There is no mistake. I will tell you everything when I get back. I feel all on fire with impatience till I have seen the boy. But I think you are wise to wait. It is raining heavily, I see, and that’s thunder—no, it isn’t. What on earth does the fellow mean by banging the gate in that fashion?’

‘Who is it?’ asked Lady Margaret.

‘Bernard,’ he said; then, as the hall-door was burst open and slammed to again, he added, irritably, ‘I wish he would learn to come in properly.’

‘Can anything have happened?’ she exclaimed, rising hurriedly. ‘He went out shooting with Geoffrey. Bernard!’ she called.

But the boy was already half way up-stairs, and took no notice. He was almost wet through, and terribly wild and agitated. His mother, now thoroughly alarmed, hastened after him, and the colonel followed more deliberately.

‘What’s the matter, Bernard?’ he demanded.
‘I insist upon knowing.’

Bernard hesitated, and looked round. His face was perfectly colourless.

‘Don’t ask me,’ he said, in a hoarse, half whisper. ‘I can’t speak of it.’

‘My darling, you must tell me,’ his mother said, coaxingly; and she detained him with gentle force,

Then he told her, and his words were a death-blow to the happiness that had newly come to her.

‘I have shot Josslyn Traget,’ he said.

CHAPTER IX.

BERNARD FIRES A GUN.

WE shall have to go back a few hours to explain how Josslyn came to be within reach of Bernard's gun. It was his first day at home, after an absence of nearly three months; so he spent the morning with his father and Violet, and then decided, early in the afternoon, to go and see the Shakerleys. A surprise awaited him, however, which prevented him carrying out this resolve. As he was leaving the house he saw De Rohan stepping out of a ramshackled vehicle which was drawn up before the garden-gate.

‘My dear fellow,’ exclaimed Traget, ‘I am delighted to see you.’

‘And I am delighted to see you,’ said De Rohan, laughing, ‘for I began to fear I never should. I don’t believe there is a single unbroken spring in the carriage.’

‘Whatever induced you to hire such a turn-out?’ asked Josslyn, scrutinising the horse.

‘I couldn’t get anything else. I suppose it can vegetate by the roadside whilst we talk?’

‘Yes; but you are not going back to-night?’

‘I must. I only drove over to see if you were at home, and to ask if you could take me in for a few days next week.’

‘Of course we can. But why not stay now?’

‘It might put Miss Traget to inconvenience, and I am staying with my aunt, who would be disappointed if I didn’t return.’

‘Your aunt?’

‘Yes; at the “Eagle and Child,” you know.’

‘Oh,’ and Josslyn laughed, ‘so you call Mrs. Welbeck your aunt, do you?’

‘Sometimes. She always speaks of me as her nephew. But you were going for a walk. Let me come with you—I have no end to say. And, Jim,’ he added, addressing his servant, who was still seated in the carriage, holding the greasy reins gingerly between his gloved fingers, ‘I don’t think it will be necessary for you to preside over the gee all the time unless you like; it isn’t likely to run away.’

‘Cupid can stay with it if you like, Jim,’ said Josslyn, who, though he was considerably diverted by the young man’s look of extreme disgust, had yet some good-nature left.

‘Thank you, sir,’ said James, gratefully, and resigned his seat to the delighted boy.

‘Now what have you got to say?’ asked Josslyn, when they had walked a little way.

‘A good deal; but I don’t know how to begin. I thought you would have asked how I am, or something.’

‘Well, how are you?’

De Rohan laughed.

‘Judge for yourself,’ he said, turning towards him.

Josslyn took a long look.

‘Better,’ he affirmed.

‘That’s all right. Now tell me all the Hillcrest news.’

‘I can’t. I have been in Ireland since Christmas, and only came home last night.’

‘Then you haven’t seen the Shakerleys?’

‘Not yet. Have you come to see them?’

‘Not exactly. I have come because I could not stay away. I wonder if you know what it

is to go away from a place and leave your heart behind you ?’

‘I think I do,’ said Josslyn, laughing, and blushing to the roots of his hair.

‘That’s my case. Do you think Colonel Shakerley would see me ? He said he would, when what he was pleased to call “this ridiculous affair” had blown over.’

‘Has it blown over ?’ asked Josslyn, curiously.

‘Not at all ; but it is hopeless.’

‘Why should you think that ?’

‘Because—’ he hesitated. ‘Well, because I was very near the truth when I told you I hadn’t long to live.’

‘But I thought you just said you were better ?’

‘You said that.’

Josslyn was surprised and shocked. He had not thought much of what the young man said at their last meeting, and now, though he did not look strong, he appeared to be in perfect health. So at least Josslyn thought, and not without excuse, for, though there were some signs of weakness, even clever men had been deceived. For either pride, or perhaps his naturally exuberant spirits, kept De Rohan from

everything which would betray his failing strength. He would spend half a day lying on a sofa, or lounging in a chair, but always gracefully; he would lean upon anyone with whom he chanced to be walking, but it was a habit which seemed natural to him, and his light, springing step was very unlike the slow, faint footfall of an invalid.

Josslyn found it impossible to think of death in conjunction with him.

‘Are you sure you are not mistaken?’ he asked.

‘My dear fellow, it isn’t me,’ with a laugh at his own insignificance. ‘It is half the medical faculty residing in Paris, assisted by specialists from all parts of the world, who have decreed that I must die.’

‘And can they do nothing for you?’

‘They say not, but it makes no difference. Nothing would induce me to submit to an operation.’

‘I am very sorry,’ said Josslyn, and could say no more.

He felt silenced by this near prospect of death in one so young, and De Rohan’s only half serious manner as he spoke of it was more

incomprehensible than his despair had been.

‘I am sorry,’ he replied, with something like a sigh. ‘I should like to live. But it is my own fault,’ he added, in a different tone. ‘I have brought it all on myself.’

‘How?’ asked Josslyn, surprised at the sudden change that came into his face.

‘It is the end of that cursed duel,’ he said, speaking in a low, suppressed voice, as if he were half afraid of the passion within him. ‘That, and I suppose I have led a fast sort of life.’

‘You don’t look as if you had,’ said Josslyn, after an immoderate stare, during which he was struck by the evidences of refinement and purity in the lad’s face.

De Rohan was not indifferent to his admiration even now.

‘No, that’s the beauty of it,’ he answered, gaily; throwing off the depression as quickly as it had come over him, and speaking in the light, half-playful tone in which he had begun. ‘I look like a young man just stepped out of a religious novel, as fresh as—’ a daisy, he was about to say, but there was only one Daisy for

either of them, and he could not speak the name lightly.

‘There is often a very black villain in a religious novel,’ said Josslyn, absent-mindedly.

‘Yes, but I am the other young man. You’ll see I shall make a most edifying end.’

‘Don’t joke about it, there is a dear fellow. It is awfully sad.’

‘What is?—the joke, or my near demise?’

‘Both.’

‘Then we’ll talk of something else. I mean to get as much enjoyment out of my remaining atom of life as possible.’

‘And to live in England?’

‘Yes.’ He coloured, almost painfully. ‘It is a better sort of life I live here, and God knows I have need to change.’

They had been climbing the only eminence on the common—a wild, romantic spot, covered with heather and bracken, and strewn about with broken rocks. It was only accessible on one side, for on the other considerable excavations had been made for stone, and the banks of the quarry were almost precipitous.

De Rohan stretched himself on the ground, tired with making the ascent, and Josslyn stood near him, but was held silent by the sympathy which he could find no words to express. For several seconds neither of them spoke, and then De Rohan asked,

‘Do you think the colonel would see me, Josslyn?’

‘I am sure of it,’ replied Josslyn, confidently. ‘Especially when he knows——’

‘I’m dying,’ concluded De Rohan, placidly, as Josslyn hesitated and looked embarrassed. ‘But he mustn’t know that. I have told no one but you and Jim, and,’ he added, laughing, ‘I would rather remain an out-cast all my days than be merely tolerated by them because I haven’t long to live.’

‘Whether they receive you or not,’ said Josslyn, earnestly, ‘I wish you would promise to stay with me until—I mean’ hurriedly correcting himself, ‘will you make my home yours as long as you remain in England?’

‘My dear fellow, what would Mr. Traget say if he heard you?’

‘Oh, he is kindness itself,’ said Josslyn, positively. ‘Will you come if he asks you?’

De Rohan was lying nearly full length on the ground, with his chin resting on his hand. He did not reply immediately, and his eyes filled with tears; for he was young, and weary, though he scarcely knew it, of the life he had lived.

‘I cannot refuse,’ he said at last, ‘and if ever you need a friend, Joss, I hope you may find as good a one as I have.’

He held out his hand as he spoke, and Josslyn grasped it warmly.

‘We’ll consider it settled then,’ he said, in a cheerful tone; ‘and now if you are rested we had better go home. I think it is going to rain.’

‘I can never thank you,’ De Rohan said, in a low voice, as he took his friend’s arm before beginning the descent.

‘There is no need to try,’ Josslyn assured him; and then catching sight of two men ascending the hill and being anxious to escape further thanks, he added, quickly, ‘Here is Bernard and—Wriothesley, I declare. How are

you, old fellow?' going to meet him, whilst Bernard, with a cry of joy, ran to Louis, exclaiming,

'Oh, I am glad, glad, glad.'

Geoffrey was no less glad than Bernard, but he had no words of welcome ready. He was painfully conscious of the fact that in keeping his promise to Roger Warwick he was doing De Rohan a very great injury, and wondered if the young man knew anything of his secret, and whether it was that which held him also silent. For De Rohan did not speak. He had released himself from Bernard's embrace, but stood leaning against the boy without offering any greeting to Geoffrey.

He was, in truth, unable to do so. Josslyn's unexpected kindness, and Bernard's unmistakable joy at seeing him had almost unmanned him. Nearly a minute passed before he dare trust himself to speak. But he was the first to recover, and holding out his hand said, with his winsome smile,

'I am glad to see you, Sir Geoffrey.'

There was something formal about the words, though the manner in which they were spoken

was free enough, and the use of his title gave Geoffrey an uncomfortable feeling that they were not now the good friends they once were. Yet had it been used by Josslyn, or indeed by anyone else, he would have thought nothing of it.

‘I am glad to see you, count,’ he replied, with equal formality, and an embarrassed silence followed.

How long it might have continued it is impossible to say, but at that instant Bernard gave them something else to think about. Now that he could no longer monopolise his friend the boy had been hovering round him, trying to invent some method of showing the delight he felt at seeing him. By some unlucky chance his eye fell on Geoffrey’s gun, which had been left at the foot of the hill, and it occurred to him that on joyful occasions, like the present, cannons were sometimes fired. He resolved to fire the gun. It was the first time he had ever held one loaded in his hand, and he felt rather afraid of it. His fears were not ill-founded.

There was a flash, a startling report, a cloud

of smoke, and the sound of something falling. Then an instant's awful silence.

Josslyn had been standing in the direct line of fire, but sprang to one side, though scarcely conscious of the danger threatening him. He escaped the shot, but the ground on which he trod was undermined and fell away beneath his feet. He could not save himself a second time, and fell with it a distance of several feet.

It was a hideous moment for the three young men who stood facing each other on the mound, almost afraid to descend and learn the fate of their companion. They could just see him, and he had not moved or given any sign of consciousness when De Rohan, reckless alike of life and limb, scrambled down the side of the quarry.

Geoffrey would have liked to follow him, but he knew his cousin too well to leave him alone in his present excited state, and it would have been useless to try and persuade him to descend in such a manner. He was obliged, therefore, to make a more circuitous route, and take the boy with him.

When he reached the spot it was almost a

shock to him, after the suspense and dread of the last few moments, to find Josslyn sitting up and laughing heartily over the catastrophe. De Rohan was almost in hysterics beside him.

‘My dear fellow,’ he exclaimed, ‘do you mean to say you are not hurt?’

‘I scarcely know yet,’ replied Josslyn, recovering from his mirth. ‘Not much, I think, though my ankle is pretty bad.’

‘What has happened to it?’ asked Geoffrey.

‘I don’t know, but it hurts.’

‘And you are not shot?’

‘No, only bruised a bit, and generally shaken up.’

Geoffrey breathed a sigh of relief. It was bad enough, in all conscience, but it might have been infinitely worse.

‘Do you think you could manage to get home with our assistance?’ he asked. ‘I am afraid we are going to have a storm.’

Josslyn shook his head.

‘I don’t think I could,’ he said, gravely.

They all three sat down on the ground to consider what was to be done, whilst Bernard stood

miserably aloof on the spot where Geoffrey had almost dragged him.

De Rohan was the first to make a suggestion.

‘Do you think, Joss, you could manage to get as far as Roger Warwick’s cottage? It isn’t very far, and we could fetch you from there in the carriage.’

‘I’ll try,’ said Josslyn, and made an effort to rise.

‘Lean on me,’ said Geoffrey, ‘and De Rohan will help you on the other side. Is it very bad, old man?’ he asked, sympathetically, as Josslyn limped painfully forward for a step or two, and then stopped.

‘Yes, it’s bad. But I mustn’t lean on you, Louis. Bernard will help me, won’t you, lad?’ he added, half in pity for the boy, who was watching him with a look of deplorable wretchedness.

A little of the woe left his face when he found himself of use. And De Rohan, seeing his help was not required, hastened on before, and applied himself to the task of bursting open the cottage door. This did not prove a difficult

undertaking, for the fastenings were loose and rusty, and yielded easily to the blows he dealt at them. But the interior of the cottage presented a dismantled and forlorn appearance. All the furniture had been removed, except a broken chair and an old-fashioned bedstead, which were considered too worthless to cart away. The bedding had all gone, however, unless a well-worn ticking, from which chaff and dust plentifully exuded as soon as it was touched, could be so designated.

But they were glad of even this poor place of shelter, for by the time they reached it the rain was beginning to fall in torrents, and Josslyn, who was quite exhausted, only managed to stagger across the uneven floor, and, with a groan half of pain and half of thankfulness, throw himself down on the dilapidated bed before he fainted.

Then it was that Bernard, seized with a sudden terror lest he should after all be dead, rushed wildly from the cottage, when Geoffrey was not watching him, and ran home in the state described.

CHAPTER X.

AT THE COTTAGE.

VERY much persuading and coaxing on the part of Lady Margaret, and an ebullition of bad temper on the part of the colonel, at last succeeded in eliciting from Bernard an account of what had taken place at the quarry. But, by that time, it was almost dark and the rain was falling heavily.

‘I think you had better let me go alone, Maggie,’ the colonel said. ‘I will fetch or send for you if it should be necessary.’

‘No, I must go now,’ replied Lady Margaret, with decision. ‘I shall not be able to rest till I know how Josslyn is.’

She seemed so wishful to go he could not deny her, but her determination caused a still further delay. Bernard was so excited it was impossible to leave him alone, and when Daisy

was informed of all that had happened, she was almost as agitated as the boy. She was naturally distressed to hear of the accident, and her secret love for Josslyn made her ready to anticipate the worst. In her excitement she hindered rather than helped her aunt to get ready, and the colonel, who was striding about the hall, had hard work to control his impatience. Even when they were, at last, seated in the carriage it took much longer to drive round by the road than it would have taken him to walk over the heath alone.

However, they reached in time and, even before the carriage stopped, were reassured by the cheerful light that gleamed from the cottage window, and by the sound of laughing voices.

‘Tell Miss Daisy,’ called Lady Margaret to the coachman, who was turning his horses, ‘that we hope the accident is not serious. They seem very merry.’

The colonel opened the door whilst she was speaking. He did not deem it necessary to knock and wait for admittance. The house was his own until he found a tenant for it,

and he believed he was going to see his son.

There was a sudden lull in the conversation as they entered, but the room certainly presented a very cheerful, not to say gay, appearance. The firegrate was filled with blazing logs of pine wood, and Mr. Traget, anticipating that his son might have to pass a night at the cottage, had brought with him an abundance of rugs and shawls which were strewn about the bed and floor.

The doctor had been, and gone, and now Josslyn, a shade paler than usual, but in excellent spirits, was sitting up in bed talking to his father, who was seated on a high camp stool beside him. De Rohan was perched on the end of the bed, and Geoffrey was on the broken chair, having turned it on its side for greater security. They were all drinking coffee out of Miss Traget's best china cups, and James and Cupid were busily engaged cutting bread and butter, and handing round plum-cake.

Until there had been some sort of explanation there could be no special greeting, and a slight awkwardness ensued. The colonel seemed to

experience an unusual difficulty in fastening the cottage door, and Lady Margaret, her cheeks flushed with gladness, and hardly able to restrain the loving words of welcome burning on her lips, hastened to the bed-side. Then it was Josslyn who spoke, for she knew not what to say.

‘It is more than kind of you to come,’ he said, holding out his hand to her, ‘and on such a night too.’

‘I couldn’t help it,’ she answered, smiling. ‘Bernard’s tale was so confused. I was afraid you might be very badly hurt.’

She seated herself on the camp-stool, which Mr. Traget had gallantly vacated, and the colonel came forward and questioned the young man with truly parental anxiety about the accident. Between them they certainly succeeded in recalling the truant colour to Josslyn’s cheeks.

Lady Margaret had accepted a cup of coffee, but the colonel refused to have any. It was presumed Mr. Traget’s coffee, and he had, as yet, completely ignored his presence. He

could not meet him as a friend, and did not see how to introduce the subject which had brought him to the cottage. It would have been easier if Josslyn had not been invalided, or better still if he had not been present.

Nearly a quarter of an hour passed, and very little was said. Then Josslyn, who, now that everyone was quiet, had been very nearly forgetting his embarrassment in dreamland, raised himself suddenly, and asked,

‘We never lived here, father, did we? A long time ago, I mean—before we went to Australia?’

‘I never did,’ said Mr. Traget, with a laugh; but he seemed uneasy at the question.

‘I thought we couldn’t have done, and yet I seem to remember everything in the room so well.’

‘I don’t see much to remember,’ replied his father, betraying his embarrassment in an endeavour to speak lightly. ‘Nothing except the chair Sir Geoffrey is sitting on, and the bed—very common pieces of furniture both of them.’

‘It is the bed,’ said Josslyn, beginning to take a more lively interest in the subject. ‘I am

quite sure I was once flogged, when I was a lad, for carving my name on it.'

'I am quite sure I didn't do it, then.'

'I don't think you did, but I remember it perfectly. I expect the name will be here now.' He turned round as he spoke, and pushed aside the pillows. 'Just move out of the light, Louis. Yes, here it is,' bending down to look more closely; 'but,' with a look of almost comical incredulity, 'it isn't my name.'

'It's mine,' exclaimed De Rohan, excitedly. He also had been bending over the letters. 'Lewis Warwick.'

Mr. Traget moved uneasily, and the colonel, who had been silently gazing into the fire, roused himself to say,

'You used to come here a good deal when you were a boy to play with young Warwick. I suppose it would be done then.'

'Did you know me when I was a boy?' asked Josslyn, much interested.

'Yes, lad, no one better.' Then the colonel cleared his throat once or twice, and moved a step nearer the bed. 'Josslyn, you say you

remember this place. Have you, then, no recollection of your mother, or myself ?

Before the young man, who was not a little surprised at the tone and nature of the inquiry, could frame a reply, Mr. Traget exclaimed, in a hasty and confused manner,

‘ You are making a mistake, Shakerley, you are indeed. Say no more until we have talked it over.’

‘ I am making no mistake,’ the colonel replied, coldly. ‘ I made perfectly sure of that before allowing myself to speak. Josslyn, listen. You were taken from your home when you were a child, and though we searched far and wide, and made every possible inquiry, it is barely a week since I learnt how and by whom.’

He stopped abruptly. The look of blank dismay which overspread the young man’s face was not encouraging, and, for the first time, it occurred to him that perhaps it might be no satisfaction to Josslyn to hear that Mr. Traget was not his father. Lady Margaret, who was watching the effect of the colonel’s words, experienced a feeling of keen disappointment. She

had been prepared almost to pity Mr. Traget for the loss that must be his, but now she realised that he had stolen her boy's heart so completely that he could not, if he would, make him transfer his affection at a moment's notice.

‘You will try to be a little glad, won't you, darling?’ she whispered, eagerly.

Josslyn was surprised and touched by her look of intreaty, but knew not what to say. He looked to the two men for further explanation.

‘What does it mean, father?’ he asked, addressing Mr. Traget.

‘It means that Colonel Shakerley is labouring under a false impression,’ said Mr. Traget sharply.

The young man looked unmistakably relieved, and the colonel, who was watching him, noticed it with a feeling of sharp pain, which he strove to hide by questioning Mr. Traget.

‘Prove it,’ he said, imperatively.

‘I think it is I who have a right to demand proof,’ answered Mr. Traget, not without anger.

‘What right have you, I should like to know, to come and lay claim to my son because you chance to have lost your own?’

‘Is he your son?’ asked the colonel, regarding him attentively; and then, as Mr. Traget did not reply, he added, defiantly, ‘You seem to forget how intimate we were till within some months of your emigrating. If you had had a son I must have known it. But I know that you had none, and that you told the captain of the vessel in which you sailed that the boy you had with you then was not your own son, but an adopted child.’

‘Well,’ admitted Mr. Traget, desperately, ‘even if that were so it does not prove that I took your boy.’

‘No, but I have proof of that,’ the colonel interrupted, hastily. ‘Sixteen years ago, on the 26th of August—that was the day before you sailed—you came to Hillcrest alone. When you left in the evening you took a child with you, wrapped in a grey overcoat.’

‘Who says it was a child?’

‘The station-master here thinks it was.’

‘Oh, thinks.’

‘Yes, thinks; but hear farther. On reaching the London terminus you drove straight to Dr.

Wilford's—you were at his house soon after ten o'clock, so you could not have delayed anywhere—and you had a child with you then, on the evidence of two of Wilford's servants, one of whom saw the lad, and the other heard him scream. When you left several hours later you took the boy with you. On the morning of the 27th mine was the only child missing from Hillcrest, or any of the surrounding villages.'

It certainly did sound convincing. Even Geoffrey, who had heard Roger Warwick's story, was almost persuaded; and Josslyn, in spite of his confidence in Mr. Traget, looked anxious and perturbed. Mr. Traget, who was sitting at the foot of the bed, noticed the first expression of doubt pass over the young man's face, and his own became exceedingly doleful.

'You might have spared me this, Shakerley,' he said, in a low voice. 'I told you you were mistaken.'

'But I was not mistaken, you see,' retorted the colonel, coldly. He was incapable just at present of feeling any sympathy for the man who had robbed him of his son.

Not so Josslyn. Though his heart ached when he thought of the deception that had been practised upon him, he could not forget the kindness he had received.

‘Never mind, father,’ he said, impulsively; and he stretched out his hand to Mr. Traget. ‘You have been wonderfully good to me—no father could have been better. I must always remember that.’

‘I never meant you to know anything about it, lad,’ said Mr. Traget, disconsolately, ‘or to let it make any difference.’

‘It shall make no difference,’ said Josslyn, with determination.

‘I am afraid you must choose between us,’ said the colonel, as indifferently as he could.

‘No, no, Rupert,’ entreated Lady Margaret, speaking for almost the first time, ‘he cannot do that.’

Josslyn gave her hand, which lay in his, a grateful squeeze.

‘I don’t know what I ought to do,’ he said, wearily, and looked from one man to the other.

‘I have told you,’ said Mr. Traget, a little sharply, ‘that Colonel Shakerley has no claim

upon you at all. He is not your father, and I don't know who is; but to the best of my knowledge I wronged no one when I adopted you.'

'I beg your pardon,' said the young man, penitently, but with a brightening countenance, 'I ought to have known that.'

'Then you mean to deny all that I have affirmed?' asked the colonel, before Mr. Traget could reply.

'No; I deny nothing, except that Josslyn is your son.'

'Who is he, then?'

'That I don't know. I came to Hillcrest, as you say, the day before I left England. It was a sort of farewell visit. I spent the afternoon in wandering from one familiar spot to another, and in the evening started to walk back to the station over the heath. I got as far as the cottage here, when old Warwick came out. I knew him slightly and did not want to stop with him, so I waited a bit. It was nearly dark, and he couldn't see me, though I could see him pretty clearly, for there was a light in the cottage. He stood looking about for a second or

two, as if wishing to make sure there was no one near, then went round to the back of the house, taking a spade with him.

‘He did not return, and, after a time, I got tired of waiting, and went on. I had to pass close by him, but he was so busily engaged he did not notice me, and I stopped to watch him. There was a quantity of heather and brushwood stacked at the back of the house which he removed, and dug a hole—a sort of shallow grave—where it had been. Then, after another surreptitious look round, he went into the house.

‘I had stationed myself behind an old tree that was standing in those days, and could see without being seen.

‘He soon returned, carrying something carefully wrapped up in an old blanket. This he laid in the grave, and began to fill in the earth. I could not see his face, but once I thought I heard him groan. He replaced the heather, then went back to his cottage and bolted the door.

‘There was something so mysterious about the whole proceeding that I determined to see

what he had buried. It was the work of a minute to pitch aside the brushwood, and then, with the help of an old fire shovel, I was soon at the bundle. On unwrapping it I found it to contain the body of a child. Of course it was impossible to shovel it back again, and I examined the body to see if I could find any marks of violence. As I did this I was struck with the remarkable suppleness of the limbs. But before I could discover whether or no the lad had died a violent death I heard my train coming, and remembered that if I missed it I should not be able to get to London in time to sail. The vessel was to start at six in the morning, and Violet and the nurse were already on board. I wrapped my coat round the boy and ran. The train was moving when I entered the station, but Morris had seen me coming and was holding open a carriage-door for me. I just managed to tumble in, but had not time to exchange a word with him.

‘There was no one in the compartment, and I laid the boy down on the seat before me, and wondered what in the world I must do. It was

a singularly awkward position to be in, and I sat staring at the body for several minutes, doing nothing, until it suddenly flashed into my mind that the child was not dead. After that you may be sure I lost no time in trying to restore him to consciousness. I had no remedies to apply, and was not successful. The train was express, but as soon as we reached town I got into a cab and directed the man to Wilford's. During the drive it occurred to me that the child bore a slight resemblance to poor Joss as I last saw him, and it was this resemblance which made me resolve to adopt him, if he should recover from the swoon.

‘I called you after my brother—the only one of us, except myself, who outlived his infancy,’ said Mr. Traget, interrupting his narrative for the first time to give Josslyn this bit of information.

The young man was too astonished at what he had heard to be able to reply immediately, and before he could speak the colonel begged Mr. Traget to continue.

‘I think you know all,’ he said, complying.

‘Wilford confirmed my opinion. The child was not dead, but a long time passed before we could bring him round, and then he was fearfully wild and excited. I thought we should have had the whole street up, he screamed so. Wilford kindly offered to take charge of him and fathom the mystery, as my time was limited; but when I announced my determination to adopt him, though he did not scruple to call me a fool, he helped me to get away. He warned me particularly against questioning the boy about his name or parentage until he should have quite recovered. He thought a great fright had occasioned the fit, and that if anything occurred to recall the circumstances it might prove fatal to his reason, perhaps his life. Bearing this in mind, I never questioned him at all. I began to call him Josslyn that night, and though he seemed surprised at first he never told me his name, nor did he ever allude to his earlier life. By the time we reached Australia, I believe he had forgotten everything connected with it.’

A short silence ensued as Mr. Traget ceased

speaking. It was broken by the colonel, who, though he had listened most attentively to the story, had, nevertheless, been on the point of interrupting it more than once to explain something. He now said frankly, and with evident sincerity,

‘I have wronged you, Will,’ unconsciously using the name that had been familiar when they were boys together, ‘and I am sorry for it; but I think you must see there is only one explanation to what you have been saying.’

‘And what is that?’ asked Mr. Traget, accepting the offered hand, and shaking it warmly.

‘That Roger Warwick, who bore me ill-will—and not without reason, but it is needless to go into that now—took my boy, meaning to murder him. He was on the eve of going abroad with his own son, for whom travelling had been recommended, and this was an act of vengeance. I remember his manner was very singular that night.’

‘Something of the kind occurred to me when I heard your boy was missing,’ admitted Mr. Traget, ‘and I even wrote to you explaining

how I had found Josslyn. But before I got an opportunity of posting the letter I was convinced that I was mistaken.'

'How were you convinced?'

'In many ways. First, your child was only four years old, and Josslyn was at least six or seven—Wilford said seven or eight. Then your boy was described as "handsome and engaging," Josslyn was neither—not in those days,' he added, with a smile. 'And the most substantial proof of all did not occur to me until it was pointed out by a lady on board. She had taken a great liking to Violet, and one day, when she was nursing her, said to me, "I wonder, Mr. Traget, when you decided to adopt a son, you did not insist on having a child of gentle birth, seeing he must necessarily be a companion for your charming little daughter. The boy you have got will never make a gentleman." Those were her words; but, of course, she was mistaken,' with a proud look at Josslyn. 'I told her so at the time.'

'My son was a remarkably fine lad,' said the colonel, who had been prepared for, at least,

one of these objections, 'and, of course, different people have different ideas of beauty.'

'Yes,' admitted Mr. Traget, 'but when I found Josslyn he was dressed in the ordinary week-day clothes of an English labourer's child, and evidently had not been accustomed to living with refined people. He showed that very plainly both in speech and manner.'

'Well, but if he is not my son,' said the colonel, falling back on his old argument for lack of any other, 'who is he? And what could be Warwick's object in trying to make away with him? You were with the old man when he died, Geoff,' he added, turning to address his nephew; but Geoffrey had gone.

He had anticipated some such question as this, and, not knowing how he should answer it, had slipped out of the cottage during the discussion.

'Where is he?' inquired the colonel, irritably.

'I don't know, said Lady Margaret, 'but for a long time I have suspected that Geoff had something on his mind; perhaps we shall find out what it is now, and then he will be himself again.'

‘I don’t see how on earth we are to find anything out,’ the colonel retorted, savagely. ‘Why in the name of common-sense couldn’t the fellow tell us what he knows, and have done with it, instead of going off in this insane way?’

Lady Margaret did not reply. She had detached a locket from her watch chain, which she opened, and handed to Mr. Traget, saying,

‘See, Mr. Traget,—was Josslyn anything like this when you found him?’

Mr. Traget took it, and looked at the miniature it contained.

‘Not in the least,’ he said, giving it back to her. ‘But it reminds me that I had Josslyn’s photo taken in Melbourne soon after we landed. I have it somewhere at home, and will send for it if you like.’

‘I wish you would.’

‘Then Cupid go and ask Miss Violet—or stay, I suppose I shall have to write it;’ and tearing a leaf from his pocket-book he scribbled a few lines which he gave to the boy, telling him to take it to Miss Traget and to be quick back.

Very little was said until he returned with an

envelope which he put into Mr. Traget's hand. Mr. Traget tore it open and took a photograph from it which he passed to Lady Margaret, after satisfying himself that it was the one he wanted. All eyes were anxiously fixed upon her as she looked at it.

'This is Mr. Warwick's own son,' she exclaimed, when, much against her will, she was convinced of the fact.

'Impossible,' said the colonel. 'Do you suppose the man could be such a brute as to murder his own child, and bury him like a dog at the back of the house?'

'I am quite certain of the likeness,' affirmed Lady Margaret. 'Look for yourself.'

He took the photograph and held it to the light, then looked perplexedly from her to Mr. Traget.

'I don't see that we need accuse him of having tried to murder the boy,' said the latter. 'Wilford may have been right. His theory was that the child had been terribly frightened, and Mr. Warwick probably mistook the swoon for death. It was certainly the most deadly faint I ever saw.'

‘Suppose he did believe him to be dead,’ objected the colonel, ‘was that any reason why he should bury him in the surreptitious manner you have described? And then he did assuredly go abroad the next day, and take a boy with him. Whose boy did he take if, as you affirm, he had buried his own child? He had only one.’

‘He must have taken yours.’

The colonel started as this idea was presented to him, and Lady Margaret looked at Louis. The young man had listened silently to all that had been said, and now, as he heard Mr. Traget’s assertion, a burning blush swept across his face, and left him paler than before. But he made no other sign.

‘It is impossible,’ said the colonel.

‘No, it isn’t,’ maintained Mr. Traget. ‘It has been on my mind a good deal of late. The idea first occurred to me when I heard that Count de Rohan called himself Mr. Warwick’s son. I did my best to get rid of it, however, because I did not want Josslyn to know that he is not my son.’

‘In that case it must be you,’ said the colonel, addressing De Rohan, not over graciously.

‘It seems like it. At any rate, I was on the

continent with Roger Warwick when I was a lad, and I have never doubted but that he was my father.'

'He couldn't have been,' said the colonel. 'That is, if you are quite certain, Traget, that this is a likeness of the boy you took.'

'I am quite positive of that,' answered Mr. Traget, promptly. 'There is the name of the Melbourne photographer on the back of the card, if that proves anything.'

'And you think De Rohan is my son?'

'Undoubtedly he is. Don't you think so, Lady Margaret?'

Lady Margaret, thus appealed to, looked first at one young man, and then at the other. She did not know what to think. This was the one day of her life to which she had looked forward for sixteen years as being the happiest she might ever know, and now, when it had actually arrived, there was nothing but uncertainty and embarrassment.

'I do not know,' she said, despondently.

'What do you think, Josslyn?' asked the colonel.

‘Oh, I agree with my father,’ smiling contentedly at Mr. Traget, who breathed a sigh of relief, so deep that it was almost absurd.

The colonel echoed the sigh, but more softly.

‘And you?’ he inquired of De Rohan.

‘I don’t know,’ returned the young man, laughing. ‘It is a case for Solomon.’

‘Don’t be nonsensical,’ exclaimed the colonel, impatiently, beginning to pace the cottage floor—a habit he had when perplexed or annoyed.

‘But I really don’t know,’ persisted De Rohan, in an aggravating tone. ‘I am quite ready to love anybody, as soon as I know who. By the way, Mr. Traget, shall you adopt me if you lose Josslyn?’

‘I’ll think about it.’

Lady Margaret, who had been considering the matter carefully, now addressed her husband.

‘Rupert, I am almost sure Mr. Traget is right, and very likely Roger Warwick would say something about it to Geoff. I have been quite certain, for a long time, that he was unhappy, and of course he would be if he knew where our boy was, and could not tell us.’

‘If he did know I call it confoundedly shabby of him to have kept quiet,’ said the colonel, who was in a rage, ‘and he shall know my mind about it before he is much older.’

‘I think you will understand his difficulty before you see him again,’ she said. ‘But never mind that now. You think I am right, do you not?’

‘I suppose I do,’ he said, reluctantly.

‘And I am sure of it, Lady Margaret,’ said Josslyn, who was beginning to feel sincerely sorry for De Rohan.

‘So am I,’ she said, feeling uncertain how to act.

A thousand times, and more, she had pictured this meeting to herself, changing some of the details year by year as her boy advanced from childhood to manhood, and yet she did not know what to do. She had always supposed he had been taken by uneducated people, and if he had come back to her in rags, rude in speech and coarse in manner, she would have been prepared to welcome him.

‘Are you ready to love me?’ she asked,

smiling, and holding out her hand to Louis; whilst her eyes filled with tears, but whether of pleasure or disappointment it would be hard to say.

‘I have done that ever since I knew you,’ he replied, earnestly, and lifted her hand to his lips.

‘We had better go home,’ the colonel said, suddenly. ‘Josslyn looks tired. I suppose you will stay with him, Traget?’ he added, enviously.

‘Of course;’ and then, rather doubtfully, ‘You will allow me to congratulate you?’

‘Thank you,’ replied the colonel, with more graciousness than anyone expected.

As he spoke he held out his hand to his son.

‘Are you really quite convinced?’ the young fellow asked, with a smile that scarcely hid his nervousness.

‘Quite,’ replied the colonel; then, after a slight pause, he added, regretfully, ‘I am sorry there should have been so much uncertainty.’

‘Oh, it was of course unavoidable,’ De Rohan answered, lightly.

A few minutes of awkward silence followed, and then the colonel turned to Lady Margaret.

‘How will you manage, Margaret? Shall I go first and send the carriage for you?’

‘Oh, no ; I think it is fine now, and I shall enjoy the walk. Good-night, Josslyn,’ she added, turning to the young man. ‘I may come and see you to-morrow, mayn’t I? But for my boy you would have been all right.’

‘Thank you,’ he said, but not so heartily as he would have done if De Rohan had not been standing by. ‘Bring Louis with you,’ he added, more warmly.

‘Thanks,’ the young man said.

He found his position a very embarrassing one, and was uncertain what to do. He had not been asked to accompany his parents. Should he do so without invitation, or should he stay where he was? Lady Margaret solved the difficulty by putting her hand through his arm, and then, turning to her husband, she enquired if he were ready.

‘I wait for you and Louis,’ he replied, courteously ; and they left the cottage together.

CHAPTER XI.

BROTHERS.

‘DAISY, Daisy, where are you? Come and welcome your cousin.’

It was Lady Margaret who so called as soon as they entered the house. She sincerely hoped the girl would be able to give the young man a kindly greeting—all the more so because she was conscious of having failed herself.

Daisy was not far off. She was leaning over the baluster, straining her ears to hear some word about Josslyn; yet fearing to go down and learn the truth. Ever since her uncle and aunt left the house Bernard had been distressing her, almost beyond endurance, with harrowing accounts of the accident, which he exaggerated into something very terrible indeed. Now, as she heard Lady Margaret calling she could scarcely credit the good news. Was Josslyn so

little hurt as to be able to walk home? Then truly her welcome must not be delayed.

She ran swiftly downstairs, but without hurry or confusion. Her cheeks were flushed with joy, and there was a sweet, shy beauty in her eyes as she came towards them. How ought she to greet the man she loved on such an occasion as this?

‘I’d give something to be a young man again,’ said the colonel, laughing; and Lady Margaret was more than satisfied.

But why did she stop when half way across the hall, and why did the blank look come into her face? Was she disappointed, or was she only stayed by a momentary feeling of embarrassment as she recollected how she had parted, six months ago, from the young man who now came to meet her? Whatever it was she stood abashed before him, and had not a word to say.

‘The world is full of surprises, isn’t it, Miss Shakerley?’ he said, laughingly, as he reached her side. ‘You didn’t expect to see me here to-night?’

‘I do not understand,’ she murmured, giving him her hand.

‘And I am hardly competent to explain, but I imagine we are cousins.’

‘I thought you said it was Mr. Traget, auntie?’

‘I did, dear,’ replied Lady Margaret, with well feigned cheerfulness, ‘but we were mistaken. Josslyn is Mr. Warwick’s son.’

‘And is he much hurt?’ this in a very low voice.

‘I hope not. He isn’t shot, but his leg is broken. Mr. Traget says it is very nicely broken, though—whatever that may mean.’

‘I thought you were Roger Warwick’s son,’ said Daisy, turning to De Rohan.

‘So did I, but it appears we were both wrong.’

‘And you are my cousin?’

‘With your permission.’

‘I don’t see what my permission has to do with it,’ she said, with a smile. ‘I couldn’t help it if I wished ever so.’

‘Then make the best of a bad business, and say you are glad to see me.’

‘Haven’t I said that? I thought I had, but you see I was so surprised just at first.’

‘You haven’t said it now,’ he persisted.

‘I am very, very glad. Will that do?’ She was quite sincere, but she rather held aloof from him whilst saying it, because she was half afraid he might presume on the cousinship, and kiss her. However, he attempted no such enormity, and Lady Margaret relieved her from further embarrassment by inquiring if supper were ready.

‘You know we had to run away before dinner,’ she said, ‘and I am sure we are all hungry.’

‘I believe it is quite ready,’ said Daisy.

‘Then go into the drawing-room, Louis, and I will be down in a minute. I must just speak a word to Bernard, and take off my hat.’

‘I’ll come and help you,’ Daisy said, eagerly, afraid to be left alone with De Rohan.

‘I wonder what Bernard will think of me?’ the young man was saying. ‘I am afraid he won’t half like having a brother older than himself.’

‘You need not distress yourself about what Bernard thinks,’ said the colonel. ‘I will tell him, and I shall stand no nonsense.’

‘Let him know before supper,’ De Rohan requested, as he went into the drawing-room. ‘We had better embrace when the servants aren’t looking.’

He had only just gone when Bernard came downstairs.

‘How is Josslyn?’ he asked, summoning up all his courage to address his father. He had not seen his mother to inquire.

‘He might have been worse,’ replied the colonel, drily, ‘but I should advise you to let fire-arms alone in future.’

‘I shall,’ Bernard affirmed, simply; but in a tone which convinced his father that additional admonition on the subject was needless.

‘Stay a minute,’ he said, as the boy was passing into the drawing-room. ‘I have some news which ought to interest you.’

Bernard waited.

‘I have found your brother to-day,’ the colonel continued.

‘Do you mean the little chap who was lost ever so long ago?’

‘Yes; but he isn’t such a little chap now. He is older than you are.’

Bernard burst into a fit of uncontrollable laughter.

‘What do you mean?’ asked his father, with some concern.

‘Oh, I am so glad.’

‘Why are you glad?’

‘For so many reasons.’ Bernard was as solemn as usual by this time. ‘First of all, because it won’t matter so much about me now.’

‘Matter about you?’ looking much perplexed, ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Oh, yes, you do.’ He hesitated and coloured. ‘I mean because I am not clever like Geoff and Louis. I know you think a lot about it.’

The colonel was surprised. It had never occurred to him that his son was conscious of his weak intellect.

‘My dear boy,’ he said, laying his hand in a kindly fashion on the lad’s shoulder, ‘you mustn’t give way to fancies of this sort.’

‘It isn’t fancy,’ persisted Bernard, ‘but never mind it now. Where is my brother?’

‘In the drawing-room. Go and tell him

you are glad to see him. It is more than I have had the grace to do.'

The latter part of the sentence was spoken to himself, for the boy was already gone.

De Rohan was standing on the hearthrug, with his elbow on the chimney-piece and his chin resting on his hand. He looked up with a smile as Bernard entered; but, for once, the boy was indifferent even to him. He had seen him, yet his eyes were wandering round the room in search of some one else.

'Father told me my brother was here,' he said at last. 'Do you know where he is?'

'He is here,' answered De Rohan; and said no more.

'Where?' demanded Bernard. 'For goodness sake, Louis, don't be so long in telling me.'

'I am your brother.'

The howl with which Bernard greeted this announcement was assuredly not tuneful, neither was the manner in which he precipitated himself on his brother remarkable for elegance or grace; but both were unmistakable manifestations of delight.

‘This is the very best of all,’ he said, enthusiastically. Then he raised his head, and stared at De Rohan in amazement. ‘But what is the matter, Louis?’ he asked, anxiously. ‘Aren’t you glad too?’

‘There is nothing the matter,’ the young man said, blushing, and rubbing his jacket sleeve across his eyes in a shame-faced sort of way.

‘You are curious,’ the boy murmured, and then dried the cheek that had touched his brother’s with his handkerchief.

De Rohan’s eyes were still wet, and, for an instant, there was a slight trembling about his lips, but it was too absurd, and he broke into a fit of merry laughter.

Bernard regarded him with an expression of consternation, and then, not in the least knowing why, joined in the mirth. Lady Margaret came in before they had recovered, and was not a little surprised.

‘What have you two found to laugh at?’ she enquired.

‘I don’t know, mother,’ said Bernard, as soon as he was able to speak. ‘It’s all Louis.’

He was drying his eyes and blowing his nose

undisguisedly, so De Rohan felt that he might do the same without fear of comment. Afterwards he felt better than he had done all the evening.

‘Do you know?’ asked Lady Margaret, turning to him with a smile.

‘I don’t, but I think it was at Bernard. Shall I take you in to supper?’

When they were seated at table they had every appearance of a happy and united family; for, though the colonel and Geoffrey were noticeably silent, Lady Margaret and Daisy seemed bent on each out-doing the other in showing kindness to De Rohan, who evidently appreciated their endeavours; whilst Bernard was almost brilliant.

The spirit of cheerfulness was, however, only maintained with an effort, and probably the colonel was the most comfortable of anyone, for he made no attempt to disguise his real feelings. Geoffrey was certainly unhappy, for he had had no explanation with his uncle and aunt, and, though their manner towards him was outwardly unchanged, he could not tell what they really thought of his conduct. He

had, moreover, found it impossible to congratulate De Rohan, and was almost grateful to the young man for avoiding him. Lady Margaret was distressed about Josslyn, and her son's behaviour, though he was so sweet-tempered and easily pleased, occasioned her considerable anxiety. He would have nothing for supper except sherry and biscuits, and he had too much of the one, and too little of the other, or so at least she thought—her views on the subject being very stringent. She could not, however, remonstrate with him as she might have done had he been the illiterate, clownish young fellow she had always imagined her son would be. Daisy and Bernard were both anxious about Josslyn, and De Rohan, though he disguised it admirably, was sad and weary.

It was a relief to everybody when supper was over, and they could retire for the night. But, for most of them, there was little slumber.

In the cottage Mr. Traget sat by Josslyn's bed-side, whilst Cupid, who had begged to stay, curled himself up before the fire and fell asleep. Before retiring to rest Violet sent her father a

hammock-chair, which he found infinitely more restful than the camp-stool he had brought with him. He had just wrapped a blanket round his legs, and was under the impression that he had made himself very comfortable, when Josslyn astonished him by saying,

‘Don’t spend the night in that way, father, you’ll be tired out before morning, and Cupid could get me anything I want.’

‘Do you mean I had better go home?’ inquired Mr. Traget, grimly.

‘I don’t like the idea of your sitting up all night with me.’

‘Now, Joss, don’t,’ his father entreated.

‘Don’t what?’

‘Talk in that ridiculous way. But for that miserable business this afternoon you would have taken my sitting up with you as a matter of course.’

‘I believe I should,’ said the young man, remorsefully. ‘I have been taking your kindness as a matter of course for years. I feel thoroughly ashamed of myself now.’

‘Anything more?’ interposed Mr. Traget, mildly.

Josslyn smiled. There was a good deal more, but he did not know how to say it.

Mr. Traget was the first to speak.

‘I know all you would say, lad; but if you want to repay me—mind, I say there is no occasion—forget what you have heard to-day, and be to me in the future all that you have been in the past. I want nothing more?’

‘You are very kind,’ murmured Josslyn, ‘and I can never thank you.’

‘You’ll please me best by never trying,’ said Mr. Traget. ‘Cannot you forget that there is no blood-relationship between us, and treat me just as you have always done?’

‘I am afraid it will be only too easy.’

Mr. Traget laughed.

Do you really mean that, Joss?’

‘I do indeed; but I feel I ought to do something to show my gratitude.’

‘Gratitude be hanged,’ said Mr. Traget, with more force than elegance. ‘Go to sleep, lad, and when you wake up think that you have been dreaming.’

Josslyn did both.

CHAPTER XII.

NO LONGER A SECRET.

EARLY next morning Geoffrey sought his uncle in the study, being determined not to lose any time in coming to an understanding with him. His position at the breakfast-table had been as uncomfortable as at supper on the previous evening, and once again he had been obliged to take refuge in silence. De Rohan still avoided him, and, as he now wished to have a word with him, he was not so grateful as he had been.

The colonel was writing, but looked up as his nephew entered.

‘Want something, Geoff?’

‘I want to speak to you, but can wait till you have finished your letter.’

‘The letter can wait,’ replied the colonel, pushing the sheet he had been engaged upon between the leaves of the blotter. ‘I was writ-

ing to Lawton. He had better know the end of this business.' He left the table as he spoke, and seated himself in an easy-chair near the fire. 'Now, what have you got to say?' he inquired.

Geoffrey hardly knew. He had foreseen embarrassment, and certainly had not made the interview any easier for himself by privately rehearsing all that was to be said several times.

'You would probably never have found it out but for Dr. Lawton,' he said, vaguely; ashamed of thus beating about the bush, but finding it impossible to proceed straight a-head.

'I think I should,' replied the colonel, with a smile, 'and before very long.'

'How?' asked Geoffrey, surprised.

'From you.'

'I believe you would,' the young man said, 'and I almost wish I had told you; but I don't know now what would have been right. Warwick would tell me nothing except as under the seal of confession.'

'I suppose what he told you concurred with what Traget said last night?'

'Yes, exactly. He told me that he had taken

your boy, and buried his own; but he did not live to finish the story.'

'What motive could he have for telling you if he wished you to keep the matter as secret as he had done?'

'I believe he wanted me to restore De Rohan to his inheritance in case he survived you.'

The colonel uttered a low whistle, then laughed.

'It was very thoughtful of him,' he said, 'but I should not have expected you to help him, Geoff.'

The young man's embarrassment afforded him some amusement, but Lady Margaret was right—he did not feel in the least angry with him this morning.

'I have felt very bad about it,' said Geoffrey, relieved to find that his uncle could laugh, even though it was at his expense. 'You may be sure I wanted to tell you.'

'I am rather surprised you should have trusted entirely to your own judgment. Did you never ask advice of anyone?'

'Yes; I asked De Rohan. He said "be true."

‘To your aunt and me, or to Roger Warwick?’

‘To my word, I suppose. But I told him so little, his advice was not worth much.’

‘I can very well believe that,’ said the colonel, with a smile. ‘He is about the last person I should have gone to.’

‘Still I think he was right in this case,’ answered Geoffrey, reflectively, ‘though you must feel that I have treated you abominably.’

‘I don’t,’ the colonel assured him, laughingly. ‘But,’ he added, with evident sincerity, ‘I should have been glad if the mistake had not occurred about Josslyn. Neither your aunt nor I were ready to give Louis the welcome he ought to have had after that disappointment.’

‘It was a disappointment, then?’

‘Well, yes,’ the colonel admitted, reluctantly, ‘though I wouldn’t own it to anyone but you. I should have liked a son who could have served his country.’

‘Perhaps Louis may, though not in the army.’

‘I don’t think so,’ replied the colonel, smiling. ‘He won’t legislate for his country.’

Geoffrey laughed. He was used to his uncle’s

somewhat sarcastic allusions to his proposed parliamentary career.

‘I shouldn’t despair, if I were you,’ he said, hopefully. And left the study with a lighter heart than when he entered it.

Lady Margaret was just as kind as her husband had been when Geoffrey made his apologies to her. But he could not feel altogether at ease until he had spoken to De Rohan, who, however, was singularly successful in his endeavour to avoid him.

Lady Margaret expressed her intention of going personally to inquire after Josslyn, and, as soon as luncheon was over, her son drove her to the cottage in Daisy’s pony-carriage. Bernard accompanied them, because he could not be separated from his brother for even a short time ; and, when they were gone, Daisy begged Geoffrey to ride with her.

It was late in the afternoon before the two young men came together.

De Rohan was sitting on a low chair, before the drawing-room fire, when Geoffrey found him. He was alone, and a handsome volume of

selected poems lay on the hearthrug at his feet, with its leaves crumpled up beneath the costly binding. When he saw Geoffrey enter, he picked up the book, and began to read, as if wishing to intimate that he did not intend to be drawn into conversation.

‘I want to have a word with you,’ said Geoffrey perceiving that it was useless to wait for any encouragement. The young man looked at him with a half stifled yawn, but gave no other sign of having heard. ‘You would be surprised at my silence last night,’ Geoffrey continued, not without an effort.

‘Doubtless you had a very good reason for it.’

The words were perfectly courteous, but the tone in which they were uttered was intentionally irritating.

‘I had, and I have come to explain the reason if you will allow me.’

‘As you like; but it is hardly necessary. It wouldn’t take a very wise man to discover your motive.’

He smiled superciliously, and Geoffrey was rendered nearly furious.

‘What do you suppose my motive was?’ he inquired, hotly.

‘Should you really like me to tell you?’ De Rohan asked, with a shrug of his shoulders.

‘If you will be so good.’

‘There was only Bernard between you and a rich inheritance, for few men—and I am sure you are not one of them—would consider that a pretty girl was in the way.’

For a second Geoffrey simply stared at him. Obvious as it seemed when pointed out, it had never occurred to him until now that this was the construction most people would put upon his silence.

‘If that is what you think,’ he said, struggling to appear calm, ‘I have nothing more to say.’

He left the room as he spoke, but not soon enough to escape hearing the low, mocking laugh that was De Rohan’s only response. The interview had not ended as he imagined it would, and, in his own room, he sat down to think what he should do. One thing only was certain : it was impossible for De Rohan and himself to continue living together under one roof,

and, though Hillcrest was dearer to him than his own home, he must go away.

As soon as this decision fixed itself in his mind he rang the bell, and sent a telegraphic message to the housekeeper at Wriothesley, telling her to expect him that evening. Then he hurried a few necessaries into a bag, and was considering what excuse he could offer to his uncle and aunt for this sudden flight, when there was a knock at the door.

‘Come in,’ he called, and expecting his servant back looked up to give him some directions about following with the rest of his things on the morrow.

But De Rohan stood in the doorway.

‘I am very sorry, Geoff,’ he said, with evident sincerity, ‘and I never thought it for one moment.’

But Geoffrey was not in a mood to be easily mollified. As a matter of fact, he rather resented his cousin’s intrusion.

‘Your inference was doubtless a very natural one,’ he answered, coldly.

Then they stood facing each other, both

equally uncertain what to say next. Presently De Rohan observed the aspect of the disordered room.

‘George!’ he ejaculated, whimsically, ‘but I believe I am only just in time.’

If there had been any sign of relenting about Geoffrey, this remark had the effect of rendering him adamant.

‘You are only just in time,’ he acknowledged icily, ‘and, as I particularly wish not to miss the train, I must ask you not to detain me.’

He made a step forward, but De Rohan still stood in the doorway.

‘Then you will not forgive me?’ he asked, wistfully.

‘I think it is better for me to go away,’ replied Geoffrey, evasively.

‘Because I must stay,’ said De Rohan, regretfully. ‘Well, go if you like,’ and he moved aside to let him pass, ‘nothing can make things worse than they are.’

‘Make things worse than they are?’ repeated Geoffrey, questioningly. ‘If you are not satisfied with things as they are who should be?’

‘That’s just the pity of it,’ said De Rohan, with a troubled laugh. ‘No one is satisfied. I suppose, because I am not able to go about with a long, melancholy face, you think that I can’t see, and don’t care whether I am welcome here or not; but I am not quite so blind nor so indifferent as you imagine.’

He ended with something like a sob, and going to the window looked out over the garden to where the flight of steps led down to the ravine. Geoffrey stood still in the middle of the room. There was something very real about De Rohan’s grief, and both the colonel and Lady Margaret had acknowledged that the welcome accorded him had not been as kindly a one as it might have been. Feeling ashamed of his resentment Geoffrey followed him to the window.

‘Will you forgive me?’ he asked, almost humbly.

De Rohan held out his hand, but kept his face averted. It was wet with tears, and Geoffrey knew it, though he could not see. He pressed the fingers, and remained silent.

‘What a fool you must think me, Geoff,’ murmured De Rohan, as soon as he could speak. ‘But I am sure no fellow ever longed for a home as I have longed for one, and now I would give all I possess to be as much alone in the world as I was yesterday at this time.’

‘Don’t say that,’ Geoffrey begged, earnestly. ‘Indeed, you have no occasion to.’

‘I know they are trying to make the best of me, but it isn’t six months since the colonel ordered me out of the house, and Lady Margaret refused me her hand at parting. Is it likely then that they should now receive me with open arms as their son?’

The servant, having dispatched the telegram, was coming up-stairs for further instructions. Geoffrey felt that he had got himself into a ridiculous position. Should he go, or stay? He glanced at De Rohan, and his mind was immediately made up. He had never seen him unhappy before.

‘I am not going, John,’ he said, trying not to look more foolish than was inevitable.

‘Hadn’t you better telegraph?’ inquired De

Rohan, solemnly. 'They will, perhaps, be expecting you.'

Geoffrey turned sharply round. The suggestion savoured of satire, and he felt inclined to resent it. Before he could say anything, however, their eyes met and they both laughed.

'I really cannot understand you,' Geoffrey said, as soon as they were alone.

'I know I am not consistently miserable,' De Rohan admitted, with a smile. 'But,' he added, a moment later, 'what can I do, Wriothsesley? If things go on like this much longer, I believe I shall go out of my mind.'

'I am sure you are imagining a worse state of affairs than actually exists.'

'You wouldn't be sure if you had remained in the cottage last night and seen the sort of reception I got, and when we reached home it was still worse. I mean the way Miss Shakerley ran downstairs when she thought she was going to meet Josslyn. I know it wasn't easy for her to meet me after the way we parted; but she need not have been afraid I would insult her.'

‘I am sure Daisy would not be afraid of that,’ said Geoffrey, positively.

‘You know nothing about it,’ retorted De Rohan, miserably. ‘You have always been respectable and respected.’

Geoffrey laughed.

‘And haven’t you?’

‘No ; everybody is afraid I shall do something that will bring discredit on the family. If I took to drink, or showed a propensity for gambling, they would be very distressed, but say it was what they had always feared.’

Geoffrey did not reply. He could not help feeling the young man had very nearly described Lady Margaret’s state of mind—possibly the colonel’s also.

‘If you feel so strongly about it,’ he said, after a pause, ‘why don’t you try to please them?’

‘You mean I should try to be a good boy?’ asked De Rohan, with a smile. Then he broke into a hearty laugh. ‘Good gracious, how everyone would hate me. No, there is no help for it,’ he added, with recovered gravity,

‘they must take me as I am, and make the best of me.’

The gong sounded whilst he was speaking, and with an abrupt change of tone he exclaimed,

‘Dinner, by Jove; and neither of us dressed!’

He was hastening from the room, but looked back when he reached the door. ‘You won’t say anything, Wriothsley,’ he begged. ‘About my caring, I mean. It would only make things worse than they are.’

‘Certainly not,’ replied Geoffrey, smiling. ‘You must know by this time that I can keep a secret.’

When the two young men entered the dining-room the other members of the family were already seated at the table. It was Geoffrey who apologised for their late appearance. During the short time it had taken him to change his dress he had determined to leave nothing undone which might tend to make things easier for De Rohan. He felt sincerely sorry for him, but was not a little disconcerted by the smile which passed over his face whilst he was making their excuses.

‘You must fight your own battles in future, my boy;’ such was his inward comment as he took his place at the table.

Two days had passed since he last dined, and breakfast and luncheon had been almost unheeded by him; so now, having a naturally healthy appetite, he was beginning to understand what it is to be in need of a ‘square meal.’ But, for all that, he found time to wonder at De Rohan’s demeanour.

Was he such a consummate actor that he could, in a moment, exchange the deepest melancholy for the lightest mirth? No one who could have seen him chatting pleasantly with his mother would have supposed there was the least estrangement between them, and when they went into the drawing-room he was even merry. But he was not acting. This mood was as natural to him as the other had been, and, whilst it lasted, he could not have behaved differently had he tried.

The evening was getting far advanced when Geoffrey, who had been at the piano, resigned his seat to Lady Margaret, and came and stood

by Daisy. She had been very silent for a long time, and seemed to be revolving some momentous problem in her mind.

‘What’s troubling you, Daisy?’ he enquired, playfully.

‘I don’t know what I ought to call De Rohan,’ she said, looking up to him for advice, and speaking so that no one else might hear. ‘He calls me Miss Shakerley.’

Geoffrey laughed, and then, instead of helping her, only involved her in greater difficulty by passing the question on to De Rohan himself who was coming towards them.

‘Daisy doesn’t know which of your many names she ought to employ,’ he said; ‘perhaps you can tell her.’

The young man smiled.

‘I should be grateful to hear any of my names pass your lips, dear lady,’ he replied, with a bow, ‘but Louis would sound the sweetest.’

‘Just Louis, and nothing else?’ she asked, doubtfully.

‘Just Louis, and nothing else,’ he repeated, gravely.

‘Very well; and, perhaps, as we are cousins,’ she laid great stress on the relationship, ‘you might call me Daisy. Miss Shakerley sounds rather formal for every-day use.’

‘May I?’ he asked, in such hot haste that she at once regretted having spoken.

It had been injudicious, certainly; but, from the playful tone in which he had first addressed her, she concluded that he must have forgotten his old love for her; and now she saw it all in his face, just as she had seen it on that night when he knelt at her feet and told her the story of his life.

‘As we are cousins,’ she repeated, coldly; and would have left him, if he had not caught her hand and so detained her.

Lady Margaret was playing a brilliant overture, the colonel was almost hidden behind his newspaper, and Geoffrey had left the room. They were, therefore, virtually alone, and he could speak to her without fear of being over-heard.

‘Daisy, why will you always try to get away from me?’ he asked, reproachfully.

‘I have been very foolish, please let me go,’

she pleaded, and made a gentle effort to extricate her imprisoned fingers.

He released her hand, but there was a look in his face which prevented her from leaving him.

‘You let Wriothsesley love you,’ he said, ‘why shouldn’t you let me? You are more nearly related to me than you are to him.’

‘Yes; but I have known him longer, and he is so very sensible.’

He smiled.

‘And I suppose I am not sensible, but if you will trust me as you trust him, I will promise that you shall never have cause to regret it.’

She looked at him steadily for a second or two, as if trying to measure the exact amount of truth contained in his words, and then asked,

‘Are you sure you will never misunderstand me?’

‘I am quite sure.’

‘Then,’ she smiled, and looked so witchingly lovely that the foolish fellow was driven half distracted by the sight of her beauty, ‘I will be your friend, Louis, as I am Geoff’s.’

She held out her hand to him, and he carried

it to his lips ; but was prevented from replying. For Lady Margaret suddenly left off playing, and exclaimed,

‘What are you two saying to each other? You look as if you were acting a scene from the opera.’

‘’Tis a drama in real life,’ her son replied, coolly, whilst Daisy blushed a very rosy pink. ‘“All the world’s a stage,” you know. Good-night;’ and he held out his hand to her.

She had seated herself near the fire whilst she folded up her needlework, and, instead of taking his hand, she held up her face for him to kiss, as she would have done to Geoffrey or Bernard.

The young man reddened as he bestowed the expected caress, and then looked apprehensively at his father, as if he rather expected him to resent it.

The colonel smiled, and it may be his own parting with the boy was a trifle more gracious for the little scene.

CHAPTER XIII.

GEOFFREY'S ADVICE.

THE news of De Rohan's return to Hillcrest, and the fact of his now being the acknowledged son of Colonel Shakerley and Lady Margaret, created a profound sensation in the neighbourhood. A great portion of each day had to be given up to receiving visitors; for the young man was a general favourite, and everyone came to call upon him, and to congratulate his parents. In this way the first two or three weeks after his return passed pleasantly enough.

But there was a slight cloud on Lady Margaret's brow, and a look of thoughtful anxiety in her eyes, when she and Daisy returned to the drawing-room one evening about this time. She did not take her accustomed chair by the

fire, but retired with some sewing to a rather remote corner of the room, and seemed relieved when Daisy resumed the book she had been reading when the gong summoned them to dinner.

A longer time than usual elapsed before they were joined by the colonel and Geoffrey. The elder man brought with him a pile of newspapers and reviews, which he had hitherto neglected to read, and settled himself to the perusal of them without comment.

‘Have the boys gone?’ Lady Margaret inquired of Geoffrey.

‘Yes, some time ago.’

‘Will you give us some music?’ she presently asked, with more earnestness than usually accompanies such a request. ‘It will help me to think.’

He smiled, and going to the piano commenced to play one of Mendelssohn’s ‘Songs without Words.’ Probably he guessed her thoughts, and he had promised to help her to the best of his ability.

There was to be a confirmation at Hillcrest, and to-night the vicar was holding his first

class. Both Colonel Shakerley's sons were intending candidates, and Lady Margaret had taken great pains with Bernard's preparation. She had also sought for an opportunity to speak with her elder boy on the same subject, but had found none—he ever having something to say or do which rendered serious conversation unattainable.

Three weeks had passed since the young man came home to Hillcrest, and now his mother, sitting apart from the others and bending over her sewing to hide her troubled countenance, was forced to admit that she knew him no better than she did on the night he walked at her side from Roger Warwick's cottage. True he talked almost incessantly, and about himself as often as not; yet of his thoughts, occupations, and friends she knew nothing. If he had been obliged to look to his father to supply him with the necessaries of life, something must have transpired. But he lived in the house more as a guest than as a son, keeping his own servants, his own horses, and, of course, in money matters he was entirely independent of his parents.

What the exact amount of his income was Lady Margaret did not know ; but she felt sure it was very considerable, and had spoken to him about spending it judiciously. He replied, laughingly, that 'he had more money than he knew what to do with.' A fact that was made sufficiently evident by his reckless liberality.

He was always affectionate, and ; sweet-tempered ; very kind to Bernard, and courteous to Daisy ; ready to go anywhere, or engage in any undertaking which promised to give either of them pleasure. Still, in spite of all this, Lady Margaret was uneasy about him.

How did he spend his time when he was not with them ? He had no settled occupation, and steadily refused to improve his mind. He had a vast correspondence for so young a man, and nearly all his letters bore foreign post-marks, and came from nearly all parts of the world. These letters caused his mother more anxiety than anything else.

'Who were their numerous writers?' she asked herself, repeatedly. Writers, mostly women, who were strangers to her, and who,

some inner consciousness told her, must remain strangers till the end of time. Nay, her son had admitted so much.

One day, when he had been answering one of these epistles at her work-table, she had seen him direct his letter to a Russian countess with a Paris address, and said,

‘I should like to know your friends, Louis.’

‘I should like you to know some of them,’ he replied, readily.

‘The countess,’ she then said, but nervously, for she anticipated the answer. And she had been right. The young man’s colour deepened as he replied, shamefacedly,

‘Oh, the countess. It is impossible you should ever know her.’

Daisy and Bernard had been in the room at the time, so the conversation could not be pursued, but his words had rung in her ears ever since.

‘Surely,’ she thought, ‘when he returns from the class this evening he will be in a more serious frame of mind than usual, and I shall be able to speak to him.’

This was why she sat apart, and requested Geoffrey to play.

At last the hall door opened, and voices were heard in animated discussion ; then, after a brief silence, De Rohan entered the drawing-room alone.

Lady Margaret motioned him to a seat beside her. It was a very low chair, which made it necessary for him to look up when he spoke to her, and she could not help being struck by the refinement and purity of his expression. Surely it could not be anything but the index to a pure and honest mind.

‘What sort of a class have you had?’ she inquired, by way of introducing what she so much wished to say.

‘I scarcely know. It was such a novel experience.’

‘But you like it?’

‘Oh yes, it’s great fun.’

This was not the answer his mother expected or desired. And she perceived that, in the matter of seriousness, her boy had returned from the class much as he went.

‘I don’t see what you should find to be amused at,’ she said, rather severely.

‘Oh, at Mr. Grey,’ he replied, laughing at the remembrance of something that had taken place earlier. ‘He is an adorable old man, but awfully funny.’

‘In what way?’

‘It isn’t easy to particularise, but if he puts a question to a fellow who can’t answer it he is so considerate of his feelings. You know his way.’

And without more ado the graceless young fellow gave a representation of the good clergyman’s manner of conducting a class, which showed his own power of mimicry in a new light, and kept Geoffrey and Daisy in fits of laughter. Lady Margaret was disappointed. Was it only for this she had sat alone nearly all the evening communing with herself? She was angry also with Geoffrey. He, at all events, ought to have known better.

‘Did he ask you any direct question?’ she inquired, gravely.

Yes; my duty towards my neighbour, and

for the life of me I couldn't put an answer into words.'

'I think you might, at least, have looked up your catechism.'

'How could I, when I did not even know of its existence? But it didn't much matter,' he added, lightly. 'The question was passed on to the fellow next me, and he couldn't answer it; but he had the grace to grow red and look ashamed of himself, which it didn't occur to me to do; then a wiry, red-haired, little chap stood up and recited a form of words which made me doubly thankful not to have attempted any phraseology of my own.'

He looked hopelessly incorrigible as he sat there, smiling at the recollection of what he might have said had sufficient time been given him, and his mother despaired of ever making a good impression on him.

She decided to say no more at present, for now Geoffrey had left off playing, and had she spoken the others must have overheard. De Rohan noticed her grave expression, however, and, attributing it to weariness, drew her sewing

out of her hands, saying, 'Don't do any more, mother ; you look tired and there is no need for you to make shirts for working lads now, is there?'

'I suppose I do it from force of habit,' she replied, smiling at his attempt to fold up the garment.

Half-an-hour later, when Geoffrey came to bid her good-night, they two were alone, and she asked him,

'Why do you judge everything Louis says or does by a totally different standard from what you set for yourself or other men?'

'Why do you?' he retorted, with less than his usual gallantry. 'If I had tried to take off a few of Mr. Grey's peculiarities you wouldn't have been so shocked about it. And on Sunday, when you remonstrated with him for singing "Maid of Athens," you said nothing to Daisy, though you must have heard her warbling "My pretty Jane" in the garden.'

'Oh, Daisy is incorrigible, I know ; but she is a dear, good girl for all that.'

'Of course ; but why can't you judge him as leniently?'

‘I don’t know. Perhaps because I am afraid he is not really good.’

‘But better than you think. Ask Josslyn. He believes in him, and is, I fancy, more in his confidence than either you or I.’

‘I am not in his confidence at all,’ she said, sadly.

‘All in good time,’ replied Geoffrey, with a smile, and kissed her affectionately. ‘But, in the meanwhile, don’t bother so much about him. I don’t like to see you looking troubled, and am convinced that if you would only take him as he is, and not be perpetually trying to improve him, you would get on better.’

The advice was not quite orthodox, perhaps, but under the circumstances it was not bad.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE OLD PIANO.

GEOFFREY went every day to see Josslyn, who had been removed from the cottage to his own home, where, however, he was still an invalid. He saw very little of Violet on these occasions ; for, though she was often in her brother's room when he arrived, she generally found some excuse for leaving them together as soon as the first greeting was over.

Geoffrey might have known—probably did know—that it was his presence which drove her from the room ; yet he never tried to detain her, nor made any apology for his frequent visits. He would open the door for her, and then return to his seat by Josslyn's sofa, and pass an hour or two with him as agreeably as if the young lady had no existence at all.

Not so Violet. The sentence of banishment

she passed upon herself was not effected without an inward struggle, and she never went beyond reach of his voice. Her own room lay near her brother's, and sitting there she could, every now and then, hear a word, or even a sentence; and sometimes the sound of laughter would fall upon her listening ear and recall the dream of happiness she had once hoped to realise.

She could not have told why she avoided Geoffrey. Perhaps she doubted her own power of self-control, and feared to show him her love a second time, when it might be too late to awaken his. Perhaps she shrank from the necessity of observing his altered manner towards her. For whereas it had once been his pleasure to talk to her exclusively, he now contented himself with including her in the general conversation; and never by word or look gave her to understand that he desired anything more.

Over and over again Violet told herself that what she had lost, was lost irrecoverably. Sometimes—so indifferent did he seem,—she

was almost tempted to question whether it had ever been in her power to attract him. But she had seen the bitter disappointment in his face when she refused his birthday gift, and the doubt could not remain. She had won his love, and then, blinded by jealousy, had thrown it from her and lost her chance of happiness for ever.

So, at least, she thought. But a seemingly small thing sometimes turns the wheel of fortune, and in her case the fates were more kindly disposed than she imagined.

One day Geoffrey left the house after a shorter visit than usual, and returned home early in order to drive out with his aunt and cousin, according to a promise made to that effect at luncheon. In the hall he encountered Daisy on her way to the drawing-room, and learnt that the ladies from Fairlawn were there, and the proposed drive had been given up.

‘I am afraid they intend to stop a long time,’ the young lady concluded, in a tone of dismay.

‘Then don’t say anything about me, Daisy,’ her cousin replied, hastily taking up his hat and preparing to go out again.

‘I think you might come and help to entertain them,’ she said.

‘Oh, you’ll get on better without me, and I think I shall go back again. Traget was disappointed I couldn’t stay longer. He finds it awfully dreary, poor fellow, being obliged to keep still all this time.

‘I am sure he does,’ said Daisy, sympathetically. ‘I don’t know how he manages to keep so cheerful.’

‘He wasn’t very cheerful to-day,’ Geoffrey admitted. ‘But I tell you what, Daisy, go and put your hat on and come with me. A visit from you would cheer him up better than anything.’

‘I wish I might,’ said the girl, heartily, ‘but I can’t desert auntie. She had a headache this morning, and Miss Rachel is sure to make it worse.’

‘Well, I’ll tell him you would have accompanied me only the Miss Whiteheads were here. That will be something.’

‘I am afraid it isn’t true,’ she objected. ‘If they hadn’t come we should have had our drive.’

‘Of course we should,’ he admitted; ‘but what am I to say, Daisy?’

‘Nothing at all about me,’ she answered, with a rather doleful smile. Then, after a moment’s thought, added, more cheerfully, ‘But do you think he would care to read the book I was reading yesterday? It is very exciting—all about shipwrecks and pirates, and seas of blood.’

‘I should think he would like it immensely,’ Geoffrey replied, laughing. ‘I’ll wait here whilst you fetch it.’

And so it came to pass that in less than an hour after his first visit Geoffrey was once more on his way to the Tragets’. He walked quickly, but paused at the garden-gate and stood listening for a second before opening it. When he next went on he was treading softly on the grass border that skirted the path. And the reason for this precaution was that he heard the sound of the piano. Not the magnificent grand piano which almost furnished one side of the gorgeous drawing-room, but a sweet-toned, old-fashioned instrument that had always stood in one corner of the dingy dining-room—the only

room in the house that had escaped from the hands of painters and upholsterers when the house was beautified.

Mr. Traget, having insisted on making a modest reservation for himself when he gave his daughter leave to do what she pleased in the house, had selected this room for his own, and had preserved all its ugliness intact.

‘I must have a place where I may smoke my pipe without feeling I am spoiling the furniture, Violet,’ he had said.

And the young lady could hardly dispute with him about it after his liberality; but she furnished another apartment for a dining-room, and rarely entered this sanctum of her father’s.

Why then was she sitting in it on this particular afternoon? And why was she singing the sweet Spanish ballad Geoffrey had so often asked for before any coldness sprang up between them? It is probable the young man knew. At any rate a new light kindled in his eyes, and a warm glow over-spread his cheeks as he approached the open window and stood listening to the music.

‘ When in thy dreaming
 Moons like these shall shine again,
And daylight beaming
 Prove thy dreams are vain ;
Wilt thou not relenting
 For thy absent lover sigh,
In thine heart consenting,
 To a prayer gone by ?’

Why should there be a sound of tears in the girl’s voice, and why should her song end thus abruptly, and her head droop low on her breast as her fingers fell from the silent keys? There was nothing in the words to make her cry, and yet she was surely crying now. Was the song fraught with tender memories, or did it awaken vain regrets ?

Geoffrey knew—or thought he knew—and a strange excitement filled him. The gravel crunched beneath his restless feet, and Violet turned her head unthinkingly. The undried tears were wet upon her face, but Geoffrey saw more than these—the love he had never ceased to long for was revealed in the tender sweetness of her glistening eyes—and his own love overmastered him. The window opened almost to the ground, and, maybe, he forgot that

houses have doors; at any rate, he was quickly in the room.

‘Tell me, Violet,’ he said, ‘was I mistaken when I thought you did not care for me?’

The words slipped from him before he had time to reflect on their abruptness; but it was well for him. The question took Violet by surprise, and she spoke the truth without concealment.

‘Yes,’ she murmured, ‘yes.’

Geoffrey could never remember anything which happened afterwards. He told the story of his love—a little blunderingly, perhaps—but what of that? Violet was listening to him, and there was rapture in the glance she gave him before her dark eyes fell. She could not hear him blame himself for not having spoken sooner and say nothing of the suspicions which had so nearly wrecked her happiness—and his, perhaps.

‘It was my fault,’ she murmured, ‘my fault alone. When I heard that Daisy was engaged I thought she was engaged to you.’

‘Daisy engaged to me!’ he exclaimed, unthinkingly. ‘Why, she wouldn’t have me.’

‘Have you asked her?’ she demanded, with a slight returning of the old fears.

‘Yes; I asked her on the day I came from Wriothesley—but she was wiser than I.’

Violet was silent for an instant. She was dismayed to think that, but for Daisy’s discretion, her own folly would have brought about the very event she had so greatly dreaded. Self-condemnation could not long continue, however, on this glad day. An irresistible smile dispelled the cloud which had been gathering on her face.

‘And do you think I am not wise?’ she inquired, archly.

‘Oh, the cases are not parallel,’ he retorted, with a laugh. And then, she looked so lovely in this recovered confidence, he forgot the doubting past, and kissed her tenderly.

The caress was hardly bestowed when they beheld Mr. Traget standing in the doorway. He was contemplating the scene before him with an expression of astonishment and perturbation; but did not seem to be capable of withdrawing himself, or of interfering to bring

it to an end. His presence, however, was sufficient to separate the young people.

‘I did not hear you enter, sir,’ said Geoffrey, with an unsuccessful effort to appear at ease.

‘No? I came in by the door,’ the elder man replied, significantly. Then they both laughed, but not without embarrassment.

During the moment of merriment Violet beat a hasty retreat. Geoffrey could tell her father everything, and she longed to be alone. She was not sorry, however, to hear Josslyn calling for her, and went to him at once. Since she was a child he had been to her as a very dear and trusted brother, whose sympathy could always be depended on. He knew so much of her story, it was easy to tell him the rest, and his hearty congratulations made her feel more deeply sensible of her happiness than anything else could have done.

In the meanwhile, Mr. Traget had addressed himself to Geoffrey.

‘You must not go away with an impression that I knew you were here, Sir Geoffrey,’ he said, apologetically. ‘I saw you enter, but

thought you were on your way to Josslyn's room.'

'I was, but I heard Miss Traget playing, and came in here, and—you know the rest, sir,' Geoffrey concluded, reddening.

'Yes, I know the rest,' Mr. Traget admitted, musingly. 'I was a young man myself once, and I loved Violet's mother.'

A brief silence followed this admission. Geoffrey was picturing a happy future, and Mr. Traget was reflecting on a past which might have been disastrous.

'You never heard me speak of my married life?' he asked, and looked searchingly into his companion's face. 'It was short and stormy, but not unhappy.'

'I really don't see what that has to do with my loving your daughter,' Geoffrey ventured to remark, after waiting for him to continue, and finding he had apparently said all he intended.

'No; then perhaps I had better be silent. But I don't know. Violet's husband will have need of patience. She is a dear, loving, warm-hearted girl; but passionate and quick-tempered

as her mother was before her. If she should find you resentful and unforgiving it would break her heart.'

'She never shall,' the young man answered, warmly.

'Then take her and be happy; but remember what I say. You must be her master, and have patience.'

Geoffrey laughed as he grasped the hand extended to him.

'I think I had better refer you to my aunt and Daisy for a recommendation as to my temper,' he said.

'No need for that, my boy. Your face speaks for itself, only one gets over-anxious as one grows older.'

Geoffrey had no suitable reply ready.

'I suppose I may come again to-morrow?' he asked, after a short silence.

'Better stay now—no time like the present, you know,' replied Mr. Traget, with recovered cheerfulness.

'I would, but I daresay Violet has seen enough of me for one day, and I promised to

write some business letters for my uncle before post-time.'

'Well, do as you like ; only bear in mind you can never come too often, or stay too long.'

'Thank you,' said Geoffrey, touched by his kindness. 'I shall not fail to come as often as I can. And, I was forgetting, my cousin sent this book for Josslyn. I am afraid he will find it rather sanguinary reading ; but she thought it might interest him.'

'I'll give it to him,' said Mr. Traget, and took the volume with a knowing look. 'He's bound to be interested in it when he knows where it has come from.'

He accompanied the young man to the door, and then went in search of his daughter. She was still in Josslyn's room, sitting on the floor with her arms resting on his couch. She rose as her father entered, and came to meet him with a sweet, shy blush mantling her cheeks.

'Well, my dear,' he said, half playfully, as he took her face between his hands and looked into her eyes, 'so you are meditating flight from the old nest ?'

‘Oh, father,’ she whispered, ‘aren’t you glad?’

‘Yes; for your sake,’ he answered, kissing her. ‘God bless and keep you, lassie, and mind you make the lad a good, obedient wife.’

There were tears in his eyes as he turned from her to Josslyn; but he winked them away before giving him the book.

‘I expect I shall lose you next,’ he observed, sagaciously, as he noticed how the young fellow’s face brightened when he caught sight of the little word ‘Daisy’ scribbled all over the fly-leaf of her book.

Josslyn shook his head, and smiled a little sadly; whilst Violet flung her arms round her father’s neck and embraced him warmly in her impulsive, hasty fashion, feeling for the first time that she should suffer a pang in leaving him, even though it were to make a home with Geoffrey.

‘Oh, it doesn’t seem right,’ she said, almost sorrowfully.

‘Not right, my dear,’ replied Mr. Traget, struggling to release himself, and laughing cheerfully. ‘Nonsense, it must be right. The world couldn’t go on were it otherwise.’

CHAPTER XV.

LOUIS' FRIENDS.

GEOFFREY and Violet were married early in June, and on the evening of the same day Lady Margaret and Daisy were together in the drawing-room. Lady Margaret was at the piano, playing in a spiritless fashion, and Daisy, who had been a bride's-maid, and still wore her bridal finery, was sitting in the cushioned window-seat with no occupation but her own thoughts.

Geoffrey had taken his young wife away to sunny Andalusia to realise the dreams of her girlhood, and, whilst listening to her aunt's music, Daisy was wondering whether she would ever realise a dream, and dreading the quiet

days that seemed to be immediately in store for her.

Presently her musings were interrupted. The colonel entered from the dining-room with his son.

‘I suppose the next event will be your coming of age,’ he was saying.

‘My coming of age,’ exclaimed De Rohan. ‘Why, I came of age nearly two years ago.’

‘It was premature, then. Your birthday is the 30th of this month.’

‘And I shall be only twenty-one?’

‘Only twenty-one.’

‘How curious! But,’ after a moment’s pause, ‘it’s uncommonly jolly too. We shall have all the fun over again.’

He had taken possession of his mother’s favourite chair—the most comfortable one in the room—and did not offer to give it up to her, although she had left the piano and was standing by his side.

The colonel noticed this, but said nothing; for, he also noticed that the young man was much quieter than he once had been; that he

carefully avoided all possible exertion and would allow even his mother to fetch and carry for him without offering any remonstrance, or seeming aware that he ought rather to wait on her. Yet he was as happy and cheerful as he had ever been, and, if he were ill, no word of complaint ever crossed his lips by which it might be known.

‘What kind of fun should you like?’ asked Lady Margaret, smiling at his enthusiasm.

‘Oh, it will have to be the old sort of thing, I suppose,’ answered the colonel, before his son could reply, ‘a dinner to the tenants, and we had a ball when I came of age; but that was in the winter.’

‘A picnic would be nice,’ said Daisy, ‘only I don’t know where we could go.’

‘I should like a bonfire,’ affirmed Bernard.

De Rohan laughed.

‘We might manage that,’ he said. ‘But I should prefer a dance to a picnic. Suppose we have a dinner for the tenants at noon, and the school-children might come for tea and games in the park afterwards, and then we could finish up with a dance in the evening.’

'It would be a very full day,' objected Lady Margaret.

'But it would be an advantage to have it all over and done with,' said the colonel. 'And we might dine at the "Hillcrest Arms," and give the children tea under a tent in the park.'

'I think Daisy's suggestion is the best,' persisted Lady Margaret. 'A picnic might be made very enjoyable, and I don't care about dances.'

'We needn't call it a dance if you would rather not,' said De Rohan. 'We might get up some charades or tableaux to begin with, have a little music and singing afterwards, and dancing would follow as a matter of course.'

'That would be the simplest plan,' said the colonel, approvingly.

'If we get up charades I should like to ask De Lys,' De Rohan continued, addressing his mother. 'He is splendid at arranging scenery.'

'Anyone you like,' she replied, readily. 'I shall be glad to know your friends.'

So it was settled, and instead of the quiet time Daisy had been anticipating every day was filled with delightful occupation.

De Rohan did very little actual work himself,

but his mind was singularly active, and when he had arranged the charades and tableaux his mother and Daisy were pressed into service to make the requisite costumes, whilst he planned other amusements. He was very easily pleased, expressed his thanks so lavishly, and showed such warm appreciation of all that was done for him that the whole household was stimulated to the border of enthusiasm. Even the servants declared it was a pleasure to work for him, and cheerfully undertook the most exceptional tasks.

‘I never saw any one like you,’ remarked Lady Margaret one evening. ‘You haven’t done a thing all day, but you have kept everyone else busily engaged, and there hasn’t been a word of grumbling.’

‘You are all so very good,’ he said, and kissed her.

She did not reply, but determined to leave nothing undone which might add to his enjoyment. It was a great pleasure to her to have her son so much with her; to see him happy and contented, and to know his occupation was entirely innocent. Still there was a source of

disquiet attending even this. She could not but perceive that a greater event than his coming of age was in danger of being overshadowed by these preparations, harmless though they were.

It wanted but three days to the birthday feast when the bishop came to hold the promised confirmation. Lady Margaret entertained him, and during the short time he remained in the house even De Rohan seemed to be seriously inclined. But he left early on the following morning, and before noon two of the young man's friends arrived from Paris.

Lady Margaret had often heard her son speak of one of them, whom he now introduced as his 'very dear friend, De Lys.' She understood that he was clever and poor, and felt interested in him accordingly. He was also undeniably handsome, and singularly silent—but that may have been owing to an inability to express himself in intelligible English.

The other man, Pierre Duval by name, was an entire stranger to her, and she did not like him so well. He was the elder of the two; had

considerably more self-assurance; was an accomplished linguist, and, though he also looked clever, talked nothing but the most trifling nonsense.

As soon as luncheon was over, De Rohan took De Lys to look at the scenery which was in preparation for the charades. He suggested several alterations, and became very talkative whilst they were working together; but that was not for long. De Rohan soon tired of any occupation, and in less than an hour he left De Lys to carry out the improvements by himself, and disappeared with Duval.

For a time De Lys went on with the work contentedly enough, then he began to hesitate, and seemed at a loss how to proceed. At last he came to Lady Margaret, and explained that until De Rohan returned he could do no more. She thought he was disappointed at the delay, and offered to go in search of her truant boy.

‘It is really too bad of him to leave you alone so long,’ she said. ‘I don’t know what he and Mr. Duval can be doing.’

De Rohan had a sitting-room on the first

floor, and when he was not in the drawing-room he was generally to be found in it. Lady Margaret found him there now. He was lying on the sofa, and Duval was seated near him, and speaking earnestly in French. The door was partly ajar, and Lady Margaret, who entered without knocking, observed that her unexpected appearance created embarrassment. De Rohan made a hasty sign to his friend to cease talking, or to change the subject of his remarks, and Duval, who became instantly silent, threw a paper over something that lay on a table at his elbow.

‘Mr. De Lys wants to consult you about the scenery, Louis,’ said Lady Margaret, without noticing Duval.

‘Tell him to do it as he likes,’ the boy answered, not so much impatiently as with utter indifference. ‘I don’t care anything about it now.’

He was showing an entirely new side of his character, and his mother, who had never before seen him either irritable or indifferent, was a good deal surprised. She did not reply, but

probably her astonishment betrayed itself in some other way. Duval noticed it, and leaning forward, and still speaking French, whispered a word in De Rohan's ear, which Lady Margaret did not hear, but which was not without effect. The young man made an effort—it was undoubtedly an effort—to regain his accustomed cheerfulness, and presently held out his hand to his mother in order that she might help him to rise.

‘I’m getting very bad-tempered,’ he said, apologetically, ‘but you must blame Pierre this time. He can be very exasperating when he likes.’

‘That is not just,’ Duval answered, with a smile.

‘Isn’t it? Then I will leave you to exonerate yourself—no one could do it better.’

He left the room as he spoke, but Duval remained standing by the table and was absently tattooing on the paper with the fingers of his left hand. It was evident he did not intend to go until he had removed what lay concealed beneath it. Had he been better acquainted with

Lady Margaret he would have understood that nothing was further from her intentions than to try to discover her son's secrets in the way he suspected.

‘You see now, Lady Margaret, the great advantage our language has over yours. One word spoken in English could hardly have done so much.’

He spoke lightly, but her silence had made him uncomfortable, and the laugh which accompanied the words was not altogether free from embarrassment.

‘I suppose I ought to apologise for interrupting a confidence,’ she said, ignoring his remark.

‘Yes—that is—no;’ the fluent Duval was actually stammering. But he recovered himself almost immediately, and asked, with singular directness, ‘Are you then, madame, not in his confidence?’

‘You know I am not,’ she replied coldly, and turned to leave the room.

The young man followed her, and, with an impulsiveness characteristic of his nation, caught her hand.

‘I wish I might tell you,’ he said, earnestly, ‘but I promised not. No matter—watch him. It will be very easy for you to discover his secret.’

Lady Margaret regarded him with surprise, and endeavoured to extricate her imprisoned fingers.

‘Watch him,’ Duval repeated, emphatically, and, in no wise disconcerted by her staring at him, he dropped her hand and returned to the table.

Before Lady Margaret had descended the stairs, she heard De Rohan talking to De Lys in his liveliest manner. Whatever trouble he might be in with Duval, it was evidently forgotten for the time being. She summoned them all to tea in the drawing-room, and by dint of hard striving concealed her uneasiness, so that it was not once guessed at. Still it remained, and before the two young men left—for they had other friends in England and could not stay at Hillcrest—it had received additional weight. The farewells were being spoken when she overheard the fragment of a

hurried conversation between her son and Duval.

‘Not till after Monday,’ the boy was entreating, in answer to something the man had just said.

‘Monday may be too late,’ was the low reply.

A strange look, as of sudden fear, came into De Rohan’s face. For an instant all the brilliant colour died out of his cheeks, and even his lips grew white; but it passed, and he spoke with confidence.

‘It won’t be too late,’ he said.

‘Have it your own way, then,’ Duval replied, but with evident reluctance. And, turning from him, he took Lady Margaret’s unwilling hand and pressed it with, as she thought, very unnecessary warmth.

CHAPTER XVI.

AT THE ORGAN.

ALL this had happened on the Saturday, and on the following afternoon, contrary to her usual custom,—for she rarely went out on a Sunday afternoon,—Lady Margaret came downstairs dressed for church. Bernard was waiting for her in the hall.

‘Where is Louis?’ she asked.

‘I don’t think he is coming.’

‘Oh, but I should like him to come,’ she exclaimed, in a tone of disappointment, and seemed undecided what to do. ‘Perhaps he will if I ask him,’ she presently said, and went upstairs again to try and persuade him.

De Rohan was in his room. He had a book in his hand, but laid it down as his mother entered, and greeted her with his sunniest smile.

‘I thought you were coming to church with Bernard and me?’ she said.

‘I did think of it, but it is too hot.’

He had a fire in his room, and a woollen shawl thrown over his knees, so the effect of the excuse was considerably weakened.

‘You know there is to be a special service for those who were confirmed on Friday,’ said Lady Margaret.

‘I know.’ He began trifling with the leaves of his book, and she thought he was yielding.

‘I should like you to come.’

He shook his head.

‘Not this afternoon, I’m too tired.’ There was a weary look in his face, but she was too disappointed to notice it. ‘Come and sit with me, mother, instead of going,’ he said, almost wistfully.

‘I have promised Bernard,’ she answered. Then, fearing to urge him further, lest she might make him not only indifferent but positively opposed to religious teaching, she determined to say no more.

As she bent to kiss him, however, she glanced

at his book, hoping it might be something suitable to the day. In one corner of the page there was a ridiculous little wood-cut representing three men strapped together in one belt.

‘I should think you might find something rather more edifying than that,’ she said, laughing, but not very cheerfully.

‘You must read it,’ he said.

‘Not I,’ she answered, decidedly. ‘I prefer something more intellectual.’ She left the room while speaking, and little thought how soon she would read his book, or with what painful interest.

All her life Lady Margaret had been a staunch believer in the Church. To attend divine service regularly was a duty she imposed upon herself, and upon all over whom she had any control. But for once she found herself unable to attend to either the prayers or the sermon, and wished she had stayed away. De Rohan had not been quite himself since that private interview with Pierre Duval. All the morning he had been silent and thoughtful, and yet seemed to have a greater dislike than ever to

being left alone. Perhaps, if she had remained with him, he might have confided to her what Duval already knew, and there would have been an end of all this suspense and worry.

The truth was Lady Margaret was becoming a little impatient. For many years her life had been singularly free from anxiety. She had only one sorrow—the continued disappearance of her child, and her daily prayer was that he might be restored to her. Now the prayer had been answered, and since its fulfilment she had scarcely known a moment's peace.

From the first she had had a suspicion that Louis was keeping something back from her—from his father, and all of them—some episode of his past life of which he was now ashamed.

The manner in which she had arrived at this conclusion was hardly fair to De Rohan. She had seen nothing in his conduct to give colour to it, but that fact had failed to influence her in his favour. Arguing from the stand-point that it was impossible for a boy to be reared, as she supposed he had been, amidst scenes of vice and dissipation and to remain uncontaminated, she

had begun, perhaps unconsciously, by doubting and mistrusting him. Consequently she had been prepared, even expecting, to make some dreadful discovery concerning him before long.

Now Pierre Duval had threatened him with exposure. Such was the meaning she attached to the few remarks she had overheard, and all during the sermon she was wondering what shameful disclosures might be brought to light when the birthday feast was over. Not money difficulties. De Rohan had an ample fortune. What then?

In company with many English ladies Lady Margaret had an idea that most French people were more or less immoral. Another solution of the mystery occurred to her which sent the hot blood tingling to her very finger ends. Surely it could not be that.

Mr. Grey had brought his discourse to an end, and she rose mechanically with the rest of the congregation, joined in the singing of a hymn, and left the church when the other people were dispersing. As she crossed the grave-yard, the vicar came out of the vestry and overtook her.

‘I thought Louis would have come with you,’ he said, as soon as the first greetings were over.

‘I quite expected he would, but he failed me at the last minute.’

They walked on in silence for a little way till Bernard grew tired of the slow progress, and left them to run home. Then Lady Margaret said,

‘I wish you would speak to Louis. He is so indifferent about keeping Sunday. I left him reading a trumpery little story this afternoon.’

‘He has been brought up on the continent, you see,’ said the vicar, apologetically. ‘But you will admit he was very good about attending the confirmation classes.’

‘And ridiculed them as soon as he got home.’

‘What did he ridicule? Me, or what I said?’

Lady Margaret, who had spoken without thought, was embarrassed by the question; but she answered, promptly,

‘I am afraid it was your kindness in not exposing his ignorance.’

The clergyman looked relieved.

‘That was all, was it?’ he said. ‘Well, we need not suppose he did not appreciate it because he was amused by it.’

‘I don’t know how you can take things so quietly,’ she said.

‘I am an old man,’ he answered, smiling, ‘and you—’ he hesitated a moment—‘and you expect too much. If your boy had come back ignorant, and without society polish, you would have had more patience. He may not have had fewer temptations because he has lived delicately and worn soft clothing.’

They had been walking in the direction of the Hall, and the colonel, who was in the garden, now came towards them. The conversation being thus interrupted, Lady Margaret left the two gentlemen together, and entered the house alone.

As she did so she heard the tones of Geoffrey’s organ, and for an instant she thought he had returned. He had promised to get back in time for the birthday feast. But no, that uncertain touch did not belong to Geoffrey, and he could

not have perpetrated such a discord. It must be Louis. She went up to him, and found him trying to play a hymn tune, the steady movement of which seemed singularly unfamiliar to his restless fingers.

‘Don’t stop,’ she said, anticipating the closing of the organ. ‘It is a pleasure to hear you play sacred music.’

He laughed, and shut in some of the stops.

‘You sing, then, and I’ll play.’

Pleased at the request she complied at once, and sang several verses to his accompaniment. Then he essayed the tenor. Their voices harmonised beautifully, as if they had been accustomed to sing together for years. Lady Margaret was delighted with the effect, but her son scarcely noticed it. The words alone reached him, and almost unconsciously he was singing—

‘We would see Jesus; yet the spirit lingers
Round the dear objects it has loved so long,
And earth from earth can scarce unclasp its fingers;
Our love to Thee makes not this love less strong.’

Lady Margaret’s lips parted to begin the succeeding verse, but De Rohan had ceased to

play, and was sitting motionless before the instrument, forgetful of her presence. By-and-bye, with a sigh that was almost a sob, he let his head fall upon his hands and hid his face.

‘Louis, what is it?’ she asked, laying her hand lightly on his shoulder.

He took no notice, yet he must have heard, and she waited, saying nothing more. After awhile he looked up with a smile. He was composed now, but a minute before he had been crying,

‘I am terribly foolish,’ he said, apologetically.

‘Tell me what it is, Louis?’ she pleaded. ‘What is troubling you?’

‘Cannot you guess?’ he asked.

It is very hard to disabuse the mind of an idea that has once firmly taken possession of it. Lady Margaret had been singing this hymn much as she had sung the one in church—scarcely knowing what the words meant. Her mind was still occupied with Pierre Duval and the threatened exposure.

‘Is it what Mr. Duval came about yesterday?’ she asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Did you know he was coming?’

‘No; but I had said I should like to consult him.’

‘Then he came on business?’

‘He came,’ he hesitated, as if at a loss for the right word—‘professionally.’

He looked at her curiously as he said it, but she was too busy cudgelling her brains for the solution of the mystery to notice it. She only saw that he was most reluctant to speak, and again the hateful suspicion which had first crossed her mind in church recurred.

‘Louis,’ she said, earnestly, ‘if it is anything you cannot tell me, tell your father. You will not find him hard or——’

She stopped abruptly. A look of bewilderment had come into the young man’s face whilst she was speaking, and now, as her meaning dawned upon him, he flushed with anger.

‘You are altogether mistaken,’ he said, speaking with more resentment than she had ever known him show.

His tone carried conviction with it, and Lady

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Margaret felt as if a load of doubt and anxiety had suddenly been removed.

‘You must forgive me, Louis,’ she said, really sorry to have vexed him. ‘When you are so reserved I don’t know what to think.’

His anger was always short-lived, and now his only wish was that she might never recall her words and grieve because of them.

‘I ought to have told you the truth long ago,’ he said, gently. ‘Traget is always worrying me about it.’

‘Josslyn knows, then?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then I really think I ought to know.’

She looked happier than she had done for many a day, and the poor lad felt more reluctant than ever to make her the recipient of his trouble. Without exaggerating her affection for him, he knew she would be greatly distressed by what he had to say. Why then should he not defer the telling of it for a day or two, at any rate until the birthday feast was over? Perhaps by then she would see for herself what was the matter with him.

Lady Margaret had very rarely seen him look pensive, and now she was watching him closely. For the first time she noticed the symptoms of ill-health which were all too plainly visible in his face when he was not laughing or talking. A new thought occurred to her. Was he making himself unhappy by brooding over some slight ailment? She had always supposed him to be fanciful and over-sensitive. What more likely than that he should magnify a trifling indisposition until it assumed the aspect of a serious disease?

‘Louis, are you ill?’ she asked, suddenly.

He smiled, but she saw at once that she had guessed the cause of his dejection.

‘You foolish boy not to tell me,’ she said, caressing one of his delicate hands. ‘With proper advice I don’t doubt we shall soon have you all right again.’

She spoke, as she felt, confidently, and did not look in the least uneasy. Before De Rohan could elaborate a suitable reply—one which should make her feel less hopeful, yet not reveal too much—there came the sound of carriage

wheels, then the colonel was heard welcoming some one with unusual heartiness, and a man's voice replied.

‘It is Geoffrey!’ Lady Margaret exclaimed, joyfully. An instant later she regretted having spoken. What would Louis think of her? ‘Surely,’ she told herself, in bitter self-reproach, ‘she might have waited long enough to hear what ailed him.’ True, the words had slipped from her involuntarily, but none knew better than herself that had the positions been reversed—had Geoffrey been unhappy and about to confide to her the cause of his distress—De Rohan might have entered with a flourish of trumpets and she would not have heard.

Eager to atone for her want of sympathy, she turned again to her boy, and was amazed by the change she saw in him. A smile of unmistakable gladness was lighting up his face, and not a trace of languor remained.

‘Yes, it’s Geoff,’ he said, holding out his hand to her. ‘Let us go to him.’

CHAPTER XVII.

COMING OF AGE.

‘MANY happy returns of the day.’

It was being repeated for at least the twentieth time, and breakfast was not yet over.

‘I am sorry to be so late with my good wishes,’ said Lady Wriothesley, apologetically, ‘but I was very tired last night.’

‘You don’t look tired now,’ said De Rohan, in a complimentary tone.

‘No, I have recovered ;’ and she smiled, probably conscious that she had never looked more beautiful. ‘What were you discussing when I came in? You all sounded very much in earnest.’

‘The weather,’ said Geoffrey. ‘What do you think of it?’

‘I should like to hear the general opinion before committing myself to any assertion.’

‘It is very diversified.’

‘These brilliant mornings generally prove delusive,’ observed the colonel, characteristically.

‘Oh, it won’t rain,’ affirmed De Rohan, none the less characteristically. ‘It never does when I want to enjoy myself.’

Lady Margaret laughed.

‘I think there would be a better prospect of your enjoying yourself to-day if you would get something to eat,’ she said.

‘You will have to reply to the toast when your health is drunk,’ remarked the colonel, gloomily. ‘Have you considered what you will say?’

‘No. I shall trust to some sort of inspiration coming to me when I am on my legs.’

‘You’ll not say anything worth hearing, then.’

‘Perhaps not, but I’ll engage to say it well.’

He laughed conceitedly, and sweeping a great heap of letters together, carried them off to his own room for perusal.

The morning passed very rapidly, as such

mornings will, in giving finishing touches to this, that, and the other. Geoffrey and Violet had both been persuaded to take part in the tableaux, and Lady Margaret and Daisy volunteered to find suitable costumes for them. Once again the old chests had to be rummaged, and quaint old garments were brought to light, in which Geoffrey laughingly declared he felt a fool, and everyone agreed his wife looked lovely.

De Rohan kept in his own room, busy with his correspondence, till nearly noon, then he went out to join those of his father's tenants who were already assembled. He had scarcely left the house when he was surrounded by the village children, who had been impatiently waiting for his appearance, and now left their games and ran delightedly towards him. They had not been expected until the afternoon, but they had had their dinner about eleven o'clock, and thought it was afternoon.

Lady Margaret watched him anxiously as he passed before the window where she was sitting, with the children pressing round him and

loudly proclaiming their good wishes. He was leaning upon one of them,—heavily, it seemed, for the little shoulder was pressed down beneath the weight of his hand,—and, though he answered them cheerfully, there was an unusual quietness about him. His mother noticed it, and commented on it to Geoffrey, who was in the room with her.

‘I don’t like that way Louis has of leaning on the people he is walking with,’ she said.

‘I am afraid he isn’t very strong,’ he answered, guardedly.

‘You think that is the reason? I have been trying to persuade myself it is only a habit.’

‘You are partly right.’ He saw he had made her uneasy, but did not know whether he would be altogether justified in doing away with the impression. He found De Rohan greatly changed, and did not feel at all easy about him himself. ‘It is a habit. but I think it originated in a feeling of weakness.’

‘I shall speak to Dr. Lawton about him,’ said Lady Margaret. ‘He will be here this evening.’

Geoffrey was prevented from replying by the

entrance of his uncle, who inquired gloomily whether he were ready to start.

The colonel hated days of this description. He had never been able to meet his tenants in a friendly fashion, and now he was exceptionally harassed. In spite of his boy's self-assurance he had not much confidence in him, and had, moreover, a distinct recollection of his own coming of age, and of the sorry figure he had made.

‘I wonder what sort of a speaker Louis is?’ he said to Geoffrey, as they were walking to the ‘Hillcrest Arms.’

Geoffrey laughed.

‘I think he described himself pretty accurately: “What he says he will say well, though it may not amount to much.”’

De Rohan joined them before the colonel could reply, and they entered the inn together. The landlord met them at the door, and conducted them to the dining-room—a large, airy apartment, comfortably furnished, and scrupulously clean. The table had been laid for a considerable number of guests, most of whom were

grouped admiringly round an arm-chair which was profusely decorated with daffodils.

‘Ridiculous,’ the colonel muttered, savagely. Then, in a louder tone, ‘What will you do?’

But his son was expressing his thanks with ready grace to the blushing maiden who had done the work. Then, before seating himself, he broke off one of the flowers and pinned it in his coat whilst addressing a stout, middle-aged farmer on his left. The man chuckled over the remark and repeated it to his neighbour.

It is wonderful what one really cheerful person can do amongst even the most uncongenial spirits. The dinner would have been eaten in almost unbroken silence, but for De Rohan; who remained unaffectedly gay, and gradually the stiffness which had threatened to last throughout the meal was dispelled. Only once he allowed himself to exchange a look of sympathetic horror with Geoffrey. It was when the puddings were placed on the table, and the landlord himself proudly carried in the principal dish, on which a solid round ball was enveloped in pale blue flames.

Colonel Shakerley studiously refrained from looking at his son when the time came for him to speak, but if it was from a fear of making the lad nervous, the precaution was unnecessary. He was not easily embarrassed at any time, and now the men whom he had to address were, without exception, his personal friends. But had it been otherwise they could have hardly failed to appreciate his remarks, expressed as they were in language the most felicitous, and delivered with a fluency a statesman might have envied.

A spontaneous burst of admiration arose as the young man sat down again, and his cheeks might well be flushed with the consciousness of having won easy victory.

Rather to his surprise Colonel Shakerley found himself the centre of a small crowd as they left the inn, and walked to the park, which was thrown open for the day. The men were talking of De Rohan, and were extravagant in their praise.

‘You are fine and proud of him, I know,’ breathlessly piped one rheumatic old man, as he

hobbled painfully along beside the tall soldier, and rather wondered at his silence.

The colonel replied briefly ; but he was proud of his boy, and liked the old man for understanding so much.

When he left them, which he did as soon as they entered the park, he, in his turn, became the subject of general discussion. He was not, as a rule, popular with his poorer neighbours, most of whom were his tenants, though they had nothing definite to urge against him. They had never found him hard or grasping ; but they resented his haughty bearing, and he never interested himself in their affairs, or let them have any insight into his own. To-day he had unbended more than he was wont to do in their company, and they were disposed to judge him leniently in consequence.

In the meanwhile the colonel joined his wife, who was in a shady part of the garden with Violet and Bernard. The boy had a white rabbit on his shoulder, which he had been showing to the children.

‘Have you had a large gathering?’ she asked, as he turned to walk beside them.

‘Yes ; I think they were all there.’

‘And was the dinner nicely served?’

‘I suppose so, everyone seemed satisfied.’

‘Except you?’ she said, with a smile.

‘Oh, I hate the kind of thing. Great joints roast and boiled, and a pudding about the weight of a cannon-ball, and almost as indigestible.’

Lady Margaret laughed, and after a short silence inquired, a little anxiously,

‘Did Louis speak well?’

‘Very,’ he replied, more cheerfully. ‘The lad has his points. He’ll never make a soldier, but he’ll make a better squire than I. The people seem really attached to him.’

‘He has learnt the way to their affections,’ said Lady Wriothesley, laughing, and using her sun-shade to indicate the place where De Rohan was standing, surrounded by a crowd of young people. ‘Look at him now.’

‘He is like me,’ said Bernard, with conscious pride, ‘only he loves children and I love animals.’

Violet smiled. She liked the boy, and felt really sorry for him, neither did she admire De Rohan as much as some people did ; but if ever,

she thought, two brothers were unlike each other surely these two were.

Bernard noticed the smile, and was mortified by it.

‘We are alike,’ he persisted. ‘I heard James say so to Gault on Saturday, and he knows Louis better than any of you.’

He walked away with a good deal of offended dignity, still fondling his rabbit.

‘I wonder if James did say so, and, if he did, what he meant by it?’ said the colonel, frowning, but from perplexity rather than from provocation.

Before he could solve the problem Daisy joined them. She had not found it necessary to retire into the quiet seclusion of the garden like the other two ladies, but had stayed in the park playing—romping, she more descriptively called it—with the children. Yet she persisted in looking singularly cool and pretty, though her white dress was crumpled, and most of her hair-pins were lost.

‘Louis thinks the children will play better after tea,’ she said, addressing her aunt. ‘I

have asked Mrs. Brown to let us have it as soon as she can.'

'Why, I don't think it is three o'clock yet,' exclaimed Lady Margaret. 'And they were not to have it till four.'

'I know; but they all say they should like it now, and Louis says they can have buns and milk before they go home if they get hungry again.'

'Has Louis consulted them?' asked the colonel.

'Oh yes, and they all want it now.'

'Doubtless. You will have to go, Maggie, if it has been put to the vote in that way.'

'Shall you want me?' asked Lady Wriothesley, smiling.

'Please. There are two tables; if you and auntie will take one, Louis and I will take the other. We are a lady short, and he is very particular about having the tea served out of a teapot, and not sent round in cans.'

The ladies went to the tent, and as soon as he was alone the colonel lit his pipe, and sat down on a garden-chair to enjoy a quiet smoke. He liked these warm sunny days, and just now the

thoughts which presented themselves were exceptionally pleasing. He was gratified by his son's popularity, and felt a secret satisfaction in knowing that the man who was to succeed him would be an acquisition to the society of the neighbourhood. Of course De Rohan must take his own name, and drop the foreign title, at any rate whilst residing in England. And it was not unreasonable to expect he would make Hillcrest his home for the greater part of the year.

At this point the colonel's reflections were rudely scattered. The school-children had had their tea, and with a whoop and a shout, as of Bedlam let loose, were bounding out of the tent, and tumbling over one another in their hurry to regain freedom.

All quietness was at an end until the time came for them to disperse, and the colonel resignedly knocked the ashes out of his pipe. But, in spite of the interruption, he could hardly help smiling when he had risen from his chair and caught sight of the youthful disturbers of the peace. De Rohan and Daisy were standing together, and round them, in a half circle, were about forty small people blowing trumpets.

It was an amusing sight, but, after the first glance, Colonel Shakerley felt rather irritated by it. He wanted Josslyn to marry Daisy, and now her hand was resting on De Rohan's arm, and her face was turned up laughingly to his. She was only remonstrating with him for having provided so many musical instruments, but her words could not be heard above the din of trumpets.

‘Is it the old, old story, Pierre?’

The colonel started. It almost seemed as if his thoughts had become audible. But presently a whiff of cigar-smoke was blown towards him, and he perceived two gentlemen sitting under the shade of a straggling laburnum-tree, and partly concealed from sight by a low privet hedge, on the other side of which he was walking. They were strangers to him, and, if they had seen him, evidently had not recognised him as the master of the house.

It was the elder man who had spoken, and, when the colonel first observed him, he was looking intently into his companion's face, waiting for an answer. The attention of the younger

had been called off by hearing footsteps, but he replied at last.

‘No, no,’ with a gesture of dissent only a Frenchman could have made so expressive.

The first speaker shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

‘I cannot believe he is as ill as you say. He looks well; very well, and very happy.’

‘He keeps up wonderfully.’

‘That is what you say. Must you always persist in forbidding hope?’

‘There is none. To tell the truth, I did not think he could have lasted so long.’

De Rohan had caught sight of the two gentlemen and was coming towards them, and the colonel moved hastily away, not caring for an introduction to strangers just then.

Was this the meaning of the young man’s apparent idleness? And who were these foreigners who knew more concerning the lad than he did himself?

These thoughts gave him no rest, but at present he saw no way of answering them. He would question De Rohan when he got the

chance, and in the meanwhile he preferred to keep as much as possible out of the way of those guests who were already assembled. With this object in view he walked about the most sequestered parts of the garden until the dressing-bell rang, and then went reluctantly to his room. However much he might wish to be alone, it was, of course, impossible for him to absent himself from the dinner-table, and, after all, he might be alarming himself needlessly.

It was well the younger members of the household were in such excellent spirits, for, if the work of entertaining had devolved entirely on the host and hostess, the dinner would have been dull indeed.

A slight incident had occurred which had the effect of making Lady Margaret feel nearly as ill at ease as her husband. She had been engaged with some friends when Dr. Lawton was announced ; but she saw De Rohan receive him, and noticed that after saying a few words to him he introduced him to Pierre Duval. The two gentlemen did not meet as if they were entire strangers to each other, and, when De

Rohan left them, fell into earnest conversation.

A few minutes later the doctor came to speak to her, and then she began at once to question him.

‘You seemed to know Mr. Duval,’ she said.

‘I have heard of him, professionally, you know.’

‘What is his profession?’ she asked, remembering De Rohan had described the young man’s visit as a professional one.

‘Oh, he is another disciple of *Æsculapius*.’

Lady Margaret took alarm at once.

‘He came to see Louis on Saturday,’ she said, anxiously. ‘Dr. Lawton, do you think anything is wrong?’

‘Ask Louis,’ he replied, gravely.

Some one else claimed her attention at this point, and, though very far from feeling satisfied, she was prevented from questioning the doctor further.

Only a few of the guests had been invited for dinner; the greater number were expected to arrive in time for the tableaux. This arrangement left about an hour with compara-

tively little to do. Lady Margaret was advised to spend it quietly, and Lady Wriothesley offered to entertain for her, whilst Daisy went to gather flowers to decorate the supper-table.

Colonel Shakerley had not intended to say anything to De Rohan about the conversation he had overheard until the morning, but in the interval between dinner and the arrival of his guests an unexpected opportunity presented itself. As soon as he was at liberty he retired to the library where he found his son. The boy was poring over half a sheet of note-paper on which some names and figures were written. He looked up on hearing his father enter, and smiled, saying,

‘You are just the person I wanted.’

‘What do you want me for?’ asked the colonel.

‘I am just going to sign my will, and I should like to tell you how I have left things.’

He spoke quite naturally, yet the colonel felt as if the suspicions which had been more especially aroused that afternoon, but which, indeed, had long been troubling him, had received direct confirmation. He strove to answer as

lightly as his son had spoken; but there was a touch of sharpness in his voice when he said,

‘You surely need not begin bothering about your will to-day. I was five-and-forty before I made mine.’

‘A most suitable age,’ murmured the young man, with some amusement.

The colonel smiled.

‘Wait till you attain it. Perhaps by then you will have a wife and children to leave your property to.’

‘I shall never marry.’

‘Nonsense!’

‘It is the truth, but we won’t argue about it now. Moret will be here with the will presently, and you don’t know yet who is to be my heir.’

‘Louis, is there any occasion for this haste?’ asked the colonel, anxiously; and, laying his hand on the young man’s shoulder, he pulled him towards the light, and looked searchingly into his face.

De Rohan tried to return the gaze, but his eyes fell when they encountered his father’s, and he coloured almost painfully.

‘Don’t,’ he said.

‘Is there any occasion for it?’ persisted the colonel.

‘Yes.’ He might have been confessing to some crime, so exceedingly diffident had he become.

‘Have you consulted anyone capable of forming a correct opinion, or is it only your own fancy?’ The colonel asked the question in a vain hope that all might yet be well; but he knew the boy better than his mother did, and could anticipate the answer.

‘I have had advice. Duval and Dr. Lawton have told me, and some others.’

Before the colonel could reply there was a tap at the door, and a gentleman entered with some papers in his hand. He was about to address his client, but, perceiving he was not alone, checked himself and bowed.

The colonel, who recognised the elder of the two gentlemen he had seen in the garden, bowed in his stately fashion, and turning to his son inquired, dispassionately,

‘Who have you made your heir?’

‘Josslyn,’ answered the boy; then, seeing his

father look surprised, added, 'He was very kind to me before I left England last October, and I made the will as soon as I got back to Paris. It has been very little altered now, but I was not sure whether some difficulty might not arise if the date of the first will remained unchanged. I was not really of age, you know.'

'Let me hear what you have done,' said the colonel, and listened with grave attention whilst the will was being read, until mention was made of James. Then he looked quickly at his son.

'It is ridiculous,' he remonstrated.

'You would not say so if you knew all he has done for me,' the young man replied, signing to the solicitor to continue.

The colonel did not interrupt again, neither at the end of the reading did he refer to the provision made for James; so the will was duly signed and witnessed, and handed over to the man of law until it should be wanted.

When father and son were again alone there was a rather lengthy silence. The colonel was too absorbed in his own sad reflections to notice it, but De Rohan was very conscious of it, and

yet felt it to be one remove better than speech. Though longing to escape before he could be subjected to further questioning, he felt it would be neither right nor kind to leave his father without a word. So he waited for the inevitable talk. At last the colonel spoke.

‘How long have you known this?’ he asked, suddenly.

‘About six months.’

‘And yet you never told me?’

‘I know it wasn’t right, but it was very hard to tell you.’

‘I suppose it would be hard,’ admitted the colonel, thoughtfully. ‘I ought to have found it out.’

‘I don’t know. I don’t look ill, you see; and if you had found it out you could not have done anything.’

‘I might at any rate have spared you to-day.’

‘Have spared me to-day?’ asked De Rohan, curiously. ‘What do you mean? It has been the happiest day of my life.’

‘It doesn’t say much for others, then,’ his father replied, regretfully.

‘Indeed, you are wrong,’ said the young man, earnestly. ‘It has been a very happy time.’

‘Since when?’

‘I was meaning since I came home, but I don’t know that I had much to complain of before.’

‘That’s your way of looking at it. I think it has been a wretched business.’

De Rohan smiled.

‘Of course it would have been better if that old fool Warwick had let me alone, but after all the poor old chap hurt himself more than he hurt me.’

‘Did he?’ asked the colonel, his keen eyes fixed on the lad’s face. ‘Should you be as you are now if he had, as you put it, let you alone?’

De Rohan reddened, and shifted uneasily.

‘Don’t,’ he begged. ‘It makes me wild when I think for what I sacrificed my life.’

‘You have told me nothing yet,’ said his father. ‘What is the matter? And what the cause?’

‘Ask Dr. Lawton,’ the young man answered, making an effort to regain his accustomed cheer-

fulness. 'I don't like talking about it, and I see Traget out on the lawn. I want to tell him what I have done.'

He went towards the door as he spoke ; but, though evidently in dread of further questioning, paused before opening it. The colonel had also risen, and De Rohan thought he looked older and more worn than he was wont to do.

'Don't worry about it, father,' he said, wistfully. 'It can't be helped now, and I was hardly tried.'

'I don't blame you, lad ; don't think that,' the colonel answered, in his undemonstrative fashion, and they left the room together—the elder man to go in search of Dr. Lawton, and the younger to join his friend on the lawn.

'I have been looking for you everywhere,' Josslyn called out, as soon as he saw him coming. 'What have you been doing?'

De Rohan stretched himself on the grass before beginning an explanation, which ended with the request,

'You will have my money, Joss?' Then, seeing Traget look grave, he coloured and

added, hastily, 'it was all honestly come by. The count's father made it in a cigar manufactory.'

Josslyn smiled.

'I wasn't thinking of that,' he said; 'but is there no one who has a claim upon you?'

'No one. If you will take it I shall feel positively obliged to you, and,' he added, diffidently, 'I don't want to saddle the bequest with a lot of conditions, but if you would give the children a treat now and then——'

'What children?'

'Any who need a bit of brightness bringing into their lives. You will find a list of places amongst my papers, charity schools and orphanages, that I have occasionally remembered; but I don't wish you to feel bound to support them. Do just what you think best.'

'Why not leave your money to charities?' asked Josslyn. 'You might found a children's hospital, or——'

'That's not what I want at all,' interrupted De Rohan. 'There are plenty of people in the world who would physic a sick child, but would

never dream of spending sixpence on a toy to amuse him. I think the one thing is just as important as the other.'

'Then I am to buy dolls and peg-tops?'

'Yes, and let them be nice ones. I used to select the dolls myself. You might not like to do that; but Daisy would not mind, and she would be sure to choose pretty things.'

Josslyn reddened on hearing his name coupled with Daisy's, but said nothing. De Rohan smiled, and continued,

'And when you give a treat of any kind only invite as many as you can feast really well. I would rather make one child perfectly happy with a buttered cake than two only partially so with a slice of dry bread a-piece.'

'Very nice for the one with the cake,' said Josslyn, laughing, 'but how about the one without?'

'My dear fellow, there will always be one without in this world, neither you nor I can prevent that. But it is something,' he added, more cheerfully, 'to be able to make a few of the little people happy now and then, and I

expect a good many are enjoying themselves to-day.'

'I shall never be able to think of these things as you do,' said Josslyn.

'Indeed you will. Shall we consider the matter settled?'

Josslyn was silent for a moment or two, then asked,

'When did you first think of leaving your money to me?'

'The day you came to see me at the "Eagle and Child."'

'I thought so, and that being the case I ought to tell you I was not influenced by any desire to serve you. I came because I wanted to help——'

'To help Daisy,' said De Rohan, seeing him hesitate. 'I know that; but you were very kind to me, and it was not for Daisy you asked me to make your home mine, was it?'

'No, but——'

'But what? I want you to have the money, and I have arranged everything, so that, if you keep Dubois to manage the estate, you will have

no trouble. He understands it, and is thoroughly trustworthy.'

'My dear fellow, you talk as if you thought I needed tempting.'

'Well, I'm bound to say you don't seem very eager about it,' said De Rohan, laughing. 'Once again, shall we consider the matter settled?'

'If you will, but I wish with all my heart you might live to enjoy it yourself.'

'So do I, but I cannot last much longer. I feel like—was it Keats who said he felt the daisies growing over him?'

'I'm sure I don't know,' replied Josslyn, in a tone that betrayed no desire to learn. 'But, Louis, I really think you look better than you did a little while ago.'

'I feel better to-day than I have done for months,' said the young man, smiling, 'but I quite expect Duval would tell me it is a bad sign. And have you noticed how Jove keeps with me?' he added, stroking the dog's head. 'I believe he has a sort of instinct which tells him he won't have me long.'

'Why should you credit an animal with finer

perceptions than your dearest friends?' asked Josslyn, a little scornfully.

'You practical men are a trial to your more romantic brethren,' said De Rohan, laughing. 'You make me feel quite nervous about mentioning my other request.'

'If it is anything I can do for you don't hesitate,' said Josslyn, eagerly.

'It is only a fancy, and many people would call it a foolish one,' said De Rohan, taking out his pocket-book, and opening it at a page where some flowers had been pressed between the leaves. 'Daisy gave them to me when we were engaged. I should like them laid in the coffin with me.'

'I'll remember,' said Josslyn, and tried hard to think of something kind to say, but words failed him.

There was a short silence, during which De Rohan looked lovingly at his faded flowers, and then, after restoring the book to his pocket, nipped the heads off all the daisies within reach, and began to make letters with them on the lawn.

Josslyn watched indifferently until the word 'Daisy' was finished, and then he became interested to know what his friend would do with the little heap of flowers still remaining.

De Rohan did not hesitate. The next letter was 'T.'

As soon as he saw it, Josslyn swept his hand over the daisy heads and scattered them.

'Don't,' he said, authoritatively.

'Why not?'

'Because it isn't her name, and she might not like it.'

'I think she would like it. Why not ask her?'

'I promised not.'

'Did you?' De Rohan looked interested, and, after a moment's thought, added, 'It is sometimes well to break a promise.'

'Not in this instance, because—' he hesitated and his colour deepened—'because she promised to tell me if ever she could take my name.'

'Then you had no right to let her promise any such thing,' said De Rohan, promptly.

He had received a good many lectures from

the younger Traget, and rather enjoyed turning the tables on him in this way. And Josslyn, who knew more of the working of the compact he had entered into with Daisy than De Rohan was ever likely to know, could not but agree with him.

For a time neither of them spoke, and then De Rohan, who had been thinking deeply, said,

‘I should like to hear of you two being engaged. I am sure Daisy loves you, and you could make her happy.’

Before Josslyn could reply, Daisy herself came towards them with a basket of roses on her arm. De Rohan went to meet her.

‘You will give me a flower as it is my birthday?’ he said.

The girl complied at once.

The young man had kept careful guard over himself for many days, and all the shyness which had at first threatened to prevent their becoming friends had passed away. She was afraid of him no longer.

‘Now give Traget one,’ he said, when she had arranged the flower for him.

He spoke quite innocently, having no idea how much it meant for her to give a rose to Josslyn; but the blushes on her cheeks, and Josslyn's wistful look, told him something.

Poor Daisy, she was very much perplexed. It seemed ungracious to refuse, and yet it was impossible for her to give a rose to Josslyn.

For one long moment the young man seemed unable to help her, and then his senses returned to him, and in a low voice, full of sweet earnestness, he seconded the request.

She turned over her collection and found a perfect flower, then played with it nervously for what seemed a long time, before she could lift her shy eyes to his face, and ask,

‘Are you sure you really want it?’

‘I am sure,’ he answered, fervently.

‘I believe mother is walking in that damp ditch she calls a ravine,’ said De Rohan, looking away from them. ‘I will go and take her in before she catches cold.’

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FAREWELL.

LADY MARGARET had taken a book to her favourite seat in the ravine ; but her thoughts were too disturbing to allow her to read, and the volume lay unopened on her lap whilst she reflected on the many chance hints she had received concerning her son's failing health.

Her anxiety would not suffer her to rest, and when De Rohan found her, she was walking aimlessly up and down the green path that skirted the little stream.

Immediately, on his joining her, she noticed that he looked graver than usual, and, although it was now time for them to return to the house, she lingered awhile to question him.

The young man had determined to spare her

all knowledge of his illness until the birthday feast was over ; when she had once approached him on the subject she left him no alternative but to tell her the whole truth.

Her sorrow was very real, and the lad comforted her as best he could ; but it was a long time before he ventured to remind her that their guests would be waiting for the promised tableaux.

They left the ravine, but loitered again when they came in sight of the drawing-room windows. The scene within was very bright and animated, but they were out of touch with it. Presently, however, Geoffrey went to the piano and began to play Weber's 'Invitation to the Waltz.' The music had quite a magical effect on De Rohan. With an upward toss of his head, to throw off the feeling of depression from which he was suffering, he caught his mother by the hand, exclaiming,

'Come, we must not waste the little time still left to us ;' and led her to the house.

Lady Margaret offered no remonstrance. It was impossible for them to absent themselves

longer from their friends, and not assign a cause; but as they entered the drawing-room together she could not but feel how very far apart they were. To her it seemed almost sinful to spend an evening in music and dancing when there might be so very short a time to prepare for the inevitable change approaching. De Rohan, on the contrary, evidently regarded it as a duty, and cheerfully acknowledged it was a pleasant one.

Lady Wriothesley had made such a charming hostess that Lady Margaret found the apologies she considered due to her guests were hardly needed. They could speak of nothing but the grace and beauty of Sir Geoffrey's bride. The colonel also had been doing his best to compensate for his wife's absence, and everyone was in excellent spirits, though some of the younger people were impatient for the tableaux to begin.

On entering the room Lady Margaret had looked round in search of Pierre Duval. He had then been engaged in conversation with several other gentlemen, but as soon as he was alone she went up to him.

‘I was very rude to you on Saturday, Mr. Duval,’ she said.

‘No, indeed, Lady Margaret,’ he hastened to assure her.

‘It is kind of you not to remember,’ she said, ‘but I want you to understand that I did not know anything about Louis’s illness then.’

‘I do understand. I begged him to tell you, or to let me.’

‘He has told me now,’ she paused, and looked up searchingly into his face. ‘Mr. Duval, is it as bad as he says?’

‘I am afraid so. From the first he insisted on hearing the truth about himself.’

Lady Margaret said no more, but she was not satisfied until she had questioned Dr. Lawton.

He had placed himself where he could obtain an uninterrupted view of the tableaux, and was exhibiting a keener interest in them than anyone present. To be sure of gaining his attention, Lady Margaret addressed him when the curtain was drawn. He became all kindness and consideration when she spoke; but, like Duval, he considered the case was hopeless. Having learnt so much, Lady Margaret refrained from troub-

ling him further. She had anticipated his answer, and was able to leave him without betraying any of the emotion she felt.

As soon as he was at liberty, the doctor readjusted his eye-glass in time to see Daisy attired as the Queen of Hearts, with all the ingredients for making the famous tarts spread out on a small table before her. A murmur of approval greeted her appearance, and the girl, finding it embarrassing to have so many pairs of eyes fixed upon her, forgot the instructions she had received about keeping still, and began to make diligent use of her rolling-pin.

This incident occasioned considerable amusement, and set everybody wondering if it were real pastry she was engaged upon, and whether any tradition existed of the tarts having been made of blackberries.

Later in the evening there was some music, and Violet was asked to sing. She played her own accompaniment, and sang 'My love is like a red, red rose.'

As soon as he heard it, De Rohan looked round the room in search of Daisy. She was

sitting alone in a window recess, listening to the song, whilst a little pink blush mantled her cheek, called forth, perhaps, by a remembrance of the time when those words had been sung for her,

‘And I will love thee still, my dear,
’Till a’ the seas gang dry.’

It was just then the young man of whom she was thinking reached her side, and, drawing a chair near to hers, said,

‘I have wanted to find you alone.’ Then, taking both her hands, ‘May I congratulate you?’

He was looking straight into her eyes, and there was not a shade of sadness or disappointment in his own; but it occurred to Daisy he had never loved her so well as now, when he came to bid her farewell.

‘Oh, don’t,’ she said, turning away her face, and almost crying. ‘I don’t believe you ever changed.’

‘How could I change,’ he asked, ‘when you remain so sweet and good?’

‘I made you very unhappy,’ she murmured, still tearfully, ‘and Josslyn too.’

‘You can make up for it to him,’ he answered, smiling.

‘Yes, but you——’

‘I came to thank you for being so kind to me, and to ask you——’

‘Yes,’ she said, eagerly; for he seemed to hesitate.

‘To ask you to think of me sometimes. But don’t let it be with self-upbraiding.’

‘I think it always must be.’

‘No, no. It would not be if you knew what mischief I kept out of, so that I might be fit to offer myself to you when the time came for us to meet.’

Daisy looked up at him for the first time.

‘And just think how I treated you,’ she said, her cheeks crimsoning at the remembrance.

‘The fault was mine,’ he hastened to assure her. ‘With all my striving I was not good enough for you.’

She was going to interrupt him, but he checked her, saying,

‘You will not forget me?’

‘No, indeed,’ she murmured.

‘Thank you.’ He pressed her hand tenderly ; then said, in a lighter tone, ‘I see Traget wants to come and talk to you, but he is too good-natured to disturb us. Shall I give him a sign that he will not be *de trop* ?’

‘Yes. But, tell me first, you will not be unhappy ?’

Violet had finished her song, and before De Rohan could reply, everyone was reminding him that he had not sung a note all the evening. Greatly to the surprise of his two doctors, the young man went at once to the piano. But he did not immediately begin to sing. He ran his fingers up and down the keys, and, looking back at Daisy, said,

‘I was asked by a lady a little while ago, how it is people always listen when I sing, though I haven’t a particularly good voice.’

‘I should think you didn’t answer her,’ said Daisy, indignantly.

‘Oh, yes, I did.’

‘Then I wish you would tell me,’ said Geoffrey. ‘Because, though I really have a very good voice, people don’t always listen to me.’

De Rohan laughed.

‘I never select a song from a pile of others, as you do. I don’t often have notes at all. I think of some one, and sing what I feel.’

‘Of whom are you thinking now?’ asked Daisy, as she recognised an air from *Maritana*.

‘Of myself,’ he said, with a glance which she understood when he began to sing.

‘In happy moments, day by day,
The sands of life may pass,
In swift but tranquil tide away
From Time’s unerring glass ;
Yet hopes we used as bright to deem,
Remembrance will recall,
Whose pure and whose unfading beam
Is dearer than them all.’

His voice was just as strong and sweet as it had ever been, but he would not try the second verse. When some one asked for it he laughingly refused, and, as he so rarely finished anything he began, no one was surprised.

Josslyn lingered awhile after the other guests were gone. He had to take leave of Daisy, and explain to her that he should be away for the greater part of the next day, and consequently

could not see her again until the evening. When he said good-night, they all went with him into the hall.

The butler was there, holding the door open a very little way and interviewing some one who stood just outside—a very small some one it seemed to be from the way in which the old man was bending down.

‘Who is it, Gault?’ the colonel asked.

‘One of the Howards, sir. She wants to see Mr. Louis.’ The servants who had known De Rohan when he was a child very rarely gave him his title.

‘To see me?’ said De Rohan, moving forward.

‘Yes, sir. I’ve told her it is too late.’

But it was not too late; for the little maiden, who had been very nearly awed by the stately butler into going away without accomplishing her errand, gained courage on hearing the voice of her friend. Pushing past the old man, greatly to his surprise, she ran straight up to Louis.

The young man was standing by an old oak

settle, and he sat down upon it and drew the child towards him, whilst the others gathered round to learn the object of her visit.

It was the last time some of them ever saw the boy, and often afterwards they pictured him sitting on the grotesquely carved bench, with the gaunt suits of armour standing on either side of it, and the torn flags above. They loved to think of him as they then saw him, by the ruddy light of the fire and the pale glimmer of the candles, with his arm round the child, and his handsome face bent down to hers.

Presently he looked up.

‘It is Nancy Howard,’ he explained. ‘Jack is dying, and wants to see me.’

‘Not to-night,’ said Lady Margaret, quickly. She dreaded the effect of any further exertion for her boy after the long and fatiguing day.

‘Yes, to-night. To-morrow may be too late, and I am not tired.’

He spoke cheerfully. The child’s sad news had failed to make him sorrowful. What could a dying man want with him? His very pres-

ence seemed incongruous in a sick-room. They all thought it, but only his mother spoke.

‘I wonder what he wants?’ she said.

‘Nancy says he wants to wish me many happy returns of the day.’

‘Surely that is not so very important, and I don’t like your going out to-night. It isn’t as if you were strong.’

But he was very determined, and, after answering all her objections, drew on a light overcoat over his evening-dress; then, telling James not to wait up for him, he gave his hand to the child, and they went out together.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BREAK OF DAY.

THE silence of sleep hung over Hillcrest. Only in one house was there any sign of life—and there the angel of death had been.

De Rohan had stayed through the night with his friend; but, just as the new day began, Jack Howard left him to enter the unknown land. There were some who wept for him, and for one moment it seemed that De Rohan was touched by their sorrow. Then an infant, that had slept through the sad night, awoke and stretched out its tiny arms to him with a soft, gurgling laugh. He laughed too as he lifted the child from the cradle and held it high above his head to catch the dancing sunbeams on the ceiling. And oddly enough there was

nothing jarring in their merriment—rather it carried the beginning of comfort to those who mourned.

When the boy gave the child to its mother, she forgot the distinctions of class which separated them, and, taking his hand in her toil-stained palm, she drew him near to her and kissed him.

‘You must be tired, lad,’ she said, tenderly. ‘Go home and rest.’

He wished her good-bye, and left the cottage, feeling strangely happy as he went into the fresh, sweet air, his dog following at his heels.

He did not know it, but the fear of death which had possessed him for many a day was gone. Mr. Grey had been at the cottage, and De Rohan had received the sacrament with Jack. The service had been solemn and impressive, but he was not thinking of it now.

The beauty of the awakening world contented him. The flowers were unfolding, and once he stayed to gather a bunch of dew-gemmed roses for his mother, and yet once again to pat a dusty donkey that was browsing by the way-

side. Presently the birds began to stir, and a lark poured forth its matchless song.

And then the boy sang too—the fragment of an old song that Geoff had set to music :

‘ When the flower is in the bud, and the leaf upon the tree,
The lark shall sing me hame in my ain countree.’

It was still early in the morning. The sun had scarcely dispelled the clouds of night, and a white mist was rising from the dewy grass. But the people of Hillcrest were now astir, and pale, blue smoke was circling upwards from many a cottage chimney.

On the village green a little group of men, roughly clad, were standing together, talking in low, solemn tones.

‘ Did you hear the passing bell last night ?’ said one.

‘ Ay,’ answered another. ‘ Young Howard’s gone at last. He’s been bad a long time.’

‘ Poor Johnnie,’ said a third. ‘ They say the young squire was with him when the end came.’

‘ He was,’ replied the first speaker. ‘ My missis saw him leave the house when she was taking down the shutters.’

‘ Well, there are not many like him,’ affirmed a man who had not before spoken.

‘ That there aren’t,’ came in chorus from half a dozen voices, as the men shouldered their scythes and moved away to begin their day’s work.

They had scarcely parted when a sound broke through the stillness of the air, and with one consent they paused and looked back ; then drew insensibly nearer to each other.

‘ What was it ?’ asked one.

‘ Not the bell ?’ asked another.

But it was the bell. They stood and listened, slowly counting the strokes, whilst a strange misgiving filled the heart of each.

Twenty-one !

They looked at one another inquiringly, till a young man pointed with his finger in the direction of the Hall.

‘ Somebody’s lowered the flag,’ he said, in an awe-struck tone.

An old man who combined the duties of sexton and bell-ringer was coming towards them from the church, and they eagerly awaited his

approach. No one spoke, but as he drew nearer he could read their looks of anxious inquiry.

‘It is,’ he said, looking back to where the flag was flying only half-mast high. ‘He died this morning. God bless him.’

‘Ay, God bless him.’

The crowd had increased by this time, but not a voice was silent.

At the Hall sadness and silence filled the rooms which last night had echoed with the sound of music and laughing voices. The servants went about softly, and spoke in whispers. To them the event had come so unexpectedly.

But not to all.

Colonel Shakerley had lain awake all night, haunted by a strange foreboding of evil, and long before the household was astir he rose and dressed himself, intending to take a short walk before breakfast.

He stole noiselessly from his room, and reached the top of the stairs. There he paused. Even strong oak stairs are apt to creak beneath a stealthy foot in the small hours of the morn-

ing, and he did not wish to disturb anyone. Suddenly, as he lingered, Jove gave a quick sharp bark, and coming to him, from De Rohan's room, looked up wistfully into his face and then ran back again.

Fearing he scarce knew what, the colonel followed the dog.

De Rohan was sitting before a little writing-table; his arms were resting on it, and his head bowed down upon them. He had not long been returned from the Howards', and was still wearing the evening dress he had worn last night, with the rose Daisy had pinned in his coat hanging loosely from the button-hole.

The colonel went up to him and touched him lightly on the shoulder.

'Louis,' he said; and then, receiving no reply, in a louder tone, 'Louis, my lad, speak to me.'

Still the young man did not answer, and his father stood for a second looking down upon him. Then swiftly, and as if half ashamed of the act, he bent and kissed him, whilst the hot blood mounted to his brow, and showed the scar on his cheek with unusual distinctness.

It was but a moment and he would have rung for assistance, but seeing Dr. Lawton pass the door on his way to the bath-room, he called him instead.

Attired in a gaudy dressing-gown, originally intended for a much bigger man, the doctor presented a strange appearance; but he took in at a glance the reason of the unexpected summons. After bending over the young fellow for a second, he looked up at the colonel who was watching him anxiously.

‘You had better tell Lady Margaret,’ was all he said.

For an instant the colonel did not move, and a look as of sharp pain came into his face—a look no one but the doctor had ever seen there, and he had only seen it once before.

‘He’ll feel this just as he felt his brother’s death,’ was his silent comment, as he turned again to the boy.

By the time he reached Lady Margaret’s room the colonel had, to all outward seeming, recovered from the shock he had received. He roused her gently, for she was still sleeping,

and explained the nature of his errand in language carefully chosen so as not to alarm her. He showed no impatience whilst she put on her dressing-gown and slippers, but when she took up a comb and began to pass it swiftly through her golden hair he felt it was time to interfere.

‘Never mind your hair,’ he said.

It was the first thing he had said which implied a need of any special haste. She threw down the comb at once and turned to him.

‘What is it, Rupert?’ she demanded.

‘I think he had fainted,’ he answered, guardedly. ‘He may be better now.’

She waited to ask no more, but ran past him to De Rohan’s room. The doctor was still busy with the lad; but when she entered he gave up his place to her and retreated into a window recess where the curtains partly hid him from observation. She looked so very beautiful in her *deshabille*, and he was conscious of not appearing to advantage in his.

Lady Margaret hardly saw him. In an instant she was kneeling by her boy, with her arms about his neck and her long hair covering him.

There was no need for her to ask the doctor his opinion. She could see for herself that the end was near, and she clung to him passionately, calling him by all the endearing names she could think of.

The colonel said nothing, but looked anxiously at the doctor.

‘He may recover consciousness,’ the latter said, in answer to the look, and turned away his head, for his eyes were full of tears and he would not have them seen.

Presently there was a change. De Rohan stirred, and murmured a few broken sentences. But his mind was wandering, and the words had reference to the first Count de Rohan. He was still speaking of him when James entered the room, so quietly no one heard him but De Rohan. He heard, however, and slightly raised himself whilst a smile of recognition lighted up his face.

‘Good-bye Jim,’ he said, and stretched out his hands to him across the table.

It was his last effort. A minute’s awful stillness followed, during which the dying boy sat up-right and seemed to wait for something.

Then his lips moved, and his mother, bending over him, heard his last words.

‘“Suffer me to come to Thee.”’

It was a fragment of the prayer she had taught him when he was a child. A line which had lingered in his memory so that it might come to his aid now, when he was about to enter the presence of his Maker.

How well his mother remembered it! With a quick revulsion of feeling she forgot she had ever thought him strange, or difficult to understand. The close relationship which bound them together once again asserted itself, and the years they had been apart dwindled into insignificance.

‘My own boy,’ she murmured, but with none of the passionate emphasis which had marked her words before, and bent and kissed his lips.

This touch of reality made itself felt, though all the strained eagerness with which she had been clinging to him and all the loving expressions she had used had failed to reach him. He could not speak, but his hand sought hers, and when he found it a smile passed over his white

lips, and lingered for an instant in the tired eyes. Then, with a sigh of contentment, his head fell back upon her breast, and as he had so often slept when he was a child so he lay sleeping now—a deeper and more restful sleep.

They all saw the change pass over him. All, that is, but Lady Margaret. She was listening to the patter of bare feet along the passage, and only saw the door thrown open and her little, white-robed lad come bounding towards her. Once again she heard the child's sweet, sleepy voice stumbling through the prayer she had tried so hard to teach him, and her lips were parted with a smile as she remembered how quickly his attention wandered, and how she could never make him kneel up straight as Daisy and Bernard did.

‘Maggie.’

It was the colonel who spoke, and looking up she saw him bending over her, with that tenderness he never showed to any but herself. Then the fresh breeze, blowing in through the enclosed casement, rustled the leaves of a book that lay open on the table. She recognised it.

It was the book Louis had been reading on the Sunday when she asked him to go to church with her. The wind turned a leaf, and she saw another of the little wood-cuts in one corner of the page—a man's hand drawing down a white blind. She pulled it towards her, and read the title—‘The story of a short life.’

In a moment she seemed to realise what had happened, and, with a sudden cry, she let her head droop on her boy's shoulder and broke into bitter weeping.

Later in the day Josslyn was walking from the Hillcrest station in the direction of the Hall. As he passed through the village he was surprised at the unwonted quietness that pervaded its usually noisy little street, and still more so to see that all the flowers had disappeared from the cottage windows. Presently he caught sight of the lowered flag, and his face blanched suddenly.

What did it mean?

He strode on, more rapidly than before, and in a few moments reached the Hall. There he

saw Daisy standing on the door-steps and receiving flowers from two little children. She was dressed in black, and welcomed him with a wan smile.

‘What is it, Daisy?’ he said, putting his arm round her.

But, though he asked the question, he knew what it was, and when the girl laid her face on his shoulder, crying softly, he was not surprised.

‘When was it?’ he asked, as if she had answered him.

‘This morning, very early.’

She dried her eyes and looked down at the flowers in her hands.

‘I thought he would like me to receive the flowers myself, and to thank the people,’ she said.

‘Yes.’

Before he could say more, he heard the hushed notes of the organ, and listened in dumb surprise.

Softly, sweetly, speakingly the music stole towards them through the dim hall, and the words repeated themselves as though a voice had uttered them.

‘Oh, rest in the Lord, wait patiently for Him, and He shall give thee thy heart’s desire.’

Josslyn looked inquiringly at Daisy.

‘It is Geoffrey,’ she explained. ‘He is playing for Bernard. Nothing else will calm him.’

‘Poor boy. Has he seen him—Louis?’

‘No; he won’t, and Geoff thinks he had better not; but I think it would be better if he did. He looks beautiful.’

‘I am sure of it. May I see him?’

‘Of course. Auntie is there, and I am going now. Uncle doesn’t want us to leave her too long alone.’

‘Where is the colonel?’

‘In the dining-room; and oh, Josslyn,’ exclaimed the girl, her eyes filling with sudden tears, ‘I don’t know whether he even cares. He is having dinner just as usual.’

The young man smiled, a rather superior smile, though a sad one. He thought he understood the colonel.

‘I will go to him first,’ he said.

But, on entering the dining-room a moment later, Josslyn found he did not understand the

colonel any better than Daisy did. He was almost shocked by what he saw. The long dining-table had been laid for the whole family, and at one end of it sat the master of the house alone.

He welcomed Josslyn much as usual, and signed him to a seat at the table, inquiring if he had dined.

‘No ; I don’t want anything, thank you,’ replied the young man, a great lump rising up in his throat and almost threatening to choke him.

The colonel, at all events, seemed to understand him. He glanced at him kindly, and for a minute said nothing. Josslyn too was silent. He was trying to account for his companion’s apparent insensibility.

It was perhaps natural he should wonder at it. But long years afterwards, when the young man’s recollection of his friend had passed into a pleasant memory, the elder man thought of his son, and felt the pain of his loneliness as great as at the present moment.

‘Have you been upstairs?’ the colonel asked, at length.

‘Not yet.’

‘You must go. You were one of Louis’s best friends. And James was another,’ he added, after a pause.

‘I know he was. What will he do now, do you think?’

‘I can’t say. He is very reserved. I have asked him to remain here as long as it suits him to do so.’

The colonel rose from the table as he spoke, and they went together into the hall. There Josslyn left him and went upstairs. Daisy was waiting for him on the landing just outside De Rohan’s room. And this was well, for after his failure with the colonel, he felt almost afraid of meeting Lady Margaret in the chamber of death, and might not have entered alone.

‘You don’t mind me coming in?’ he asked, diffidently, as soon as he saw her.

‘No, indeed,’ she said, earnestly, rising to meet him. ‘You were the only one of us who rightly understood him.’

She took his arm, and together they stood by the bed-side, and then Josslyn knew why all the cottage windows had been robbed of their

flowers. They were all strewn over the white coverlet, beneath which the young fellow, who had so loved everything beautiful, lay sleeping.

It was hard to realise that he could be dead. That he would want the things no more that still lay scattered about his room just as he liked to have them. The clothes he had last worn, his favourite books, and the picture he had last painted, all were as he had left them. James had put nothing away.

A worn pocket-book lay on the table, and presently Josslyn took it up and silently turned over the leaves till he found what he was in search of. It was only a bit of faded myrtle, and two or three dead daisies; but he laid them tenderly amongst the fair flowers on the bed, and Daisy knew at last that her little offering had not been despised.

CHAPTER XX.

TWO YEARS LATER.

Two years have passed away, and Daisy has been married a twelvemonth. Her home is a very happy one, and her love for her husband is a stronger love than any she ever felt before. Yet, notwithstanding this, she has not forgotten her boyish lover of earlier days, but thinks often, with a pleasure that is half a pain, of his romantic fondness for her.

In the green churchyard of dear old Hillcrest there is a path trodden through the grass, and daily pressed by little feet. For children do not soon forget, and baby fingers crop the daisies from the hedgerows, and deck the dead boy's grave with the flowers he loved the best.

Josslyn has inherited the De Rohan property, and every year he and Daisy spend a few months

at their old castle in Normandy. When there she is the Countess De Rohan, as Louis always intended her to be. The fortune is a larger one than Josslyn had expected, but he spends the money well—better, perhaps, than his friend would have done, with all his boundless generosity—and many a weary little one has been made glad by his gifts.

At the time of his son's marriage, Mr. Traget declared his intention of leaving his house for the young people, and taking up his abode at his farm, but this neither Josslyn nor Daisy would allow. So he makes his home with them, and is well content.

Lady Margaret never had any time to indulge in idle sorrow. Bernard occupied all her thoughts from the day of De Rohan's funeral. At first the boy was inconsolable, but soon he shook off his grief, and busied himself in finding new homes for all his pets. The idea that in a little while he would be called to follow his brother had got possession of him, and his mother tried in vain to banish it from his mind. By-and-by she began to fear that he was right, and so it

proved, for when the ground was white with snow he died.

After his death Geoffrey fetched his aunt to Wriothesley, and the change to his beautiful home did her good. She spent the spring and early summer there, and during her visit Violet's daughter was born—another little Daisy, who is a new delight to Violet, and reminds Geoffrey of old times.

This little maiden is very dear to Lady Margaret, but just at present she has to take a second place, for Daisy has a bonny baby-boy whom they fondly call 'Louis the third.' In their hearts he has filled the place De Rohan's death left desolate, whilst amongst the colonel's tenants he bears the name of 'the young squire.'

One man alone—and he the colonel—feels that this baby's senseless smile can never make up to him for the loss of that joyous look, once familiar in the merry, laughter-loving eyes of his son.

THE END.



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